

Sermon: Look Both Ways

Year C, Proper 5

[1 Kings 17:8-16,\(17-24\); Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17](#)

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As you remember, we're going to be following a semi-continuous reading through 1 & 2 Kings for the next five weeks. We'll see a lot of the prophet Elijah as both the books of Kings struggle to answer *how did things go so wrong from the great promise of King David to the point where we were conquered by Babylon?* Because Elijah is the prophet that God had sent to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to point out that they are on the wrong track, leading the people of Israel to worship idols, leading them away from worshipping the God of Israel.

In today's reading, God is speaking to Elijah. Elijah has told King Ahab that there will be a three year drought, but we're earlier in the story. We haven't gotten to the contest that we walked through in such detail last week, where the prophets of Baal and Elijah sacrificed bulls to see which God would send down fire first. Elijah has delivered God's message about the drought and doubtless it's made him very unpopular. Indeed, God sends Elijah to hide in a wadi outside of Jerusalem. A wadi is a seasonal water course, like a creek that only flows in the spring. Elijah hangs out in that wadi and things are ok, because ravens bring him meat and bread twice a day. That's what it says. They bring him bread and meat in the morning and the evening. Until they don't. And until the water course dries up. Because drought hits the just and the unjust, the drought dries out the idol-worshippers and those who remained faithful to God.

So God says to Elijah, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow to feed you." (1 Kings 17:8) Elijah is in the wadi when God tells him this. He's there because he's hiding. He's certainly hiding from King Ahab. But more than that, he's hiding from Queen Jezebel. If anything, she hates him more than Ahab does. Elijah's wholly committed to being a prophet, to telling the hard truths wherever God sends him, speaking the challenges no matter how unpopular it makes him. But there has to be some part of Elijah that cringes a little. Because the wadi outside of Jerusalem where he's hiding is nominally in King Ahab's territory. But Sidon, Sidon is where Jezebel is from. He's walking into her territory, by himself, having pointed out to everyone where the blame for the drought lays.

Plus, he's being sent to a widow. In a male dominated culture like theirs, power flowed through the men. And not all men were created equal. Some were much more powerful. The ideal was to be connected with the most powerful man. In the story of the Prodigal Son, you see the younger son realize that his father is more powerful than the man he's tending pigs for. Part of his return to his father could be seen as wanting to get back into the network of relationships with the most powerful man he knew. So don't imagine it was just the women that were vulnerable. Plenty of men were too. But if you were a widow and you had no network to any other man, no matter how little power they had, then you were done for. Without some connection into a power system, you only ate if people other people gave you food.

We know Elijah goes to Zarephath and we know it turns out ok. But just for a second think of Elijah hearing this message. The ravens feeding him was kind of strange, but also clearly divine as well, since ravens don't share their food normally. In Moses' story, which Elijah knows, there was the time when the water sprang forth from the rock. So there has to be some part of Elijah wondering if painting a target on his back and heading into Queen Jezebel's territory in order to

get food from someone who has less power than he does can possibly be the best plan God can come up with. Couldn't God just combine the ravens with the water from the rock thing and Elijah could stay where he was?

The Bible certainly doesn't say that Elijah had doubts. But the details that are there to help us see how hard the first steps of this trip are. There may not have been much upside sitting in a dry creek bed with no ravens showing up. Still, on the face of it, there is a fair amount of downside in heading into the home field of the most powerful monarch in the area.

To my way of thinking, Elijah is even more faithful to walk to Zarephath in the face of his doubts, rather than just heading out without thinking through the possible consequences.

So off he goes and he finds the widow and she's gathering sticks. Now that can't be good. Because she's not even gathering decent firewood. She's pulling together something that will make a tiny fire, which means she doesn't have much to put over it. She's willing to go get him some water to drink, which, when you're having a drought, is no small thing. But when he asks for food, she reveals that she is down to her last meal, which she plans to eat with her son before starving to death.

So, he's in his enemy's home town, he's with the poorest person in the community, and apparently God has not commanded this widow to feed him. Or if God has, the message hasn't reached the widow. What does Elijah have in this moment? He has fled from the royal court where he has named names and blamed the royal couple for the drought. He has the clothes he's standing up in. He has the hunger in his belly and probably sore legs from all his walking. He has all the doubts he's been carrying with him since the wadi ran dry and the ravens flew off that last time.

In that moment, Elijah says to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it [meaning the meal mixed with and fried in the oil] and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." (1 Kings 17:13-14) It's not entirely surprising that he says that. It makes sense given everything we know about Elijah. He has been living with his doubts and his hunger for a while now. And his relationship with God is enriched each time he takes another step forward in the face of those doubts and that hunger.

What doesn't make sense is that she does it. Because until you make the last cakes with the meal and the oil, you don't find out that the jar and the jug will not fail. She's a parent and this is the last food she can provide for her child and she gives some of it to a total stranger, who at least can remember the last time he had bread and meat, something she probably can't do.

Because what parent is going to risk her child's last meal going to a con artist who's got some fancy spiel going? When you are a widow, you are wholly reliant on others who have full access to the established power system. Everything you and your child eats comes because someone decides to lift a finger. Maybe because of the commands of the God of Israel, maybe to feel good about themselves, maybe to feel less guilty. As a widow, you are not risking your last morsel, no matter how great the con man's patter sounds, because you have no way of getting justice if he rips you off.

But she does it. She does it.

What does she see in him that prompts her to share what she thinks is her last bite? Perhaps it is his words. She may hear the truth in what he's saying about the Lord the God of Israel saying that the jug and the jar will not be empty. But today's reading from Luke highlights another nuance that might slip by and yet can make a huge difference.

The way the story is told, we're meant to see right off that the widow is supposed to feed Elijah. He's the hero, he's the one whose story we're following, he's the one that God speaks to. Heck, he's the one whose name we know. The widow is supposed to be the one to take care of his needs. Indeed, God has commanded her to feed Elijah.

It's easy to miss that God has sent Elijah to take care of her.

She has no access to the power system. But neither does he. He's got to be the most unpopular guy in the country. Anyone seen feeding him will lose power. And they are both hungry, both without any additional resources to pull on. They have to see themselves in the other. Not exactly, of course, but they have to have a feel for each other's suffering. That's what "compassion" means, "suffering with."

In the passage from Luke, a widow has lost her only son. When Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her (Luke 7:13). That compassion leads him to bring her son back to life. Compassion is not something we do with the head, we do it with the heart and with the body. Our hearts are moved and our bodies swing into motion. Jesus has compassion, tells the mother, "Do not weep", then comes forward and touches the bier, the pallet her son's body was being carried on. (Luke 7:13-14)

We walk every day with doubts, with hungers, with the words of the Lord the God of Israel in our heads and on our lips. We meet others and it's hard to tell if they are in the same condition, or if they are out to take advantage of us, to strip us of some of our power or keep us from justice. Are they moving towards us out of compassion or some more sinister intention? Perhaps we would see something different in the situation if we checked to see if we were moving towards them with compassion. It was easy to see how the widow was supposed to help Elijah. It was easy to miss how Elijah had been sent to help her. *How did things go so wrong from the great promise of King David to the point where we were conquered by Babylon?* Because we stopped looking for compassion coming from us and just started looking for compassion coming toward us. We need to look both ways.