

## A Little Flour; a Little Oil

1 Kings 17:8-16; Proverbs 3:13-14; Luke 7:11-17

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When you first hear the story this woman of great trust who provided for a stranger some water and took what she thought to be her last flour and oil to make some bread for him to eat, you may think it is a strange story for Father's Day. But fear not, the person in this story who will be the central figure this morning is Elijah. Few individuals have made as dramatic an impact on a nation as did the prophet Elijah. Many are the miraculous deeds that God enables Elijah to do. One of them was read about this morning.

Let's look at a little of the back story of what was read this morning. After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel had divided itself into two parts, a northern kingdom that called itself Israel and a southern kingdom that called itself Judah. Ahab had become the king of the northern kingdom. Ahab was described as doing many wicked things.

Ahab loved power and so he married Jezebel, a priestess of the god Baal and the daughter of the king of the Sidonians. In doing so, he solidified his power against any attack upon his kingdom from Sidonia, the country nearest to Israel on the northwest border.

To please his wife, Jezebel, Ahab began to build the wooden symbols of a female deity, set them up in the kingdom, and create worship centers for that god. Jezebel imported priests from Sidonia to turn the people from their worship of Yahweh to Baal. It is written that Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

On a day, Yahweh sends the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab. Elijah traveled from Gilead, a location on the western side of the Jordan River about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee, across the Jordan River and northward toward Jezreal near the north end of the Sea of Galilee. When Elijah arrives at Ahab's court he delivers the message of Yahweh. There will be no rain, not even a dew, until Elijah says so. Israel will suffer for the wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel. Jezebel would kill Elijah if she could find him!

God maps out Elijah's travel itinerary. Turn in your pew Bibles to page 311 and follow along as I read verses 1 Kings 17:2-7. The word of the Lord came to Elijah, "Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So Elijah went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. And after a while the brook dried up because there was no rain in the land. (1 Kings:2-7)

Have you ever wondered why Elijah would include the detail about ravens being the ones who brought him food? This may seem like a strange way for God to take care of Elijah but listen to this description of ravens. Ravens have the same brain to body ratio as apes, suggesting a high level of cognition. They are known for their complex social behaviors, such as

- holding apparent grudges against people who cheat them (showing memory),
- enacting "funerals" over dead members of the species,

- recognizing human faces,
- understanding cause and effect,
- planing for the future, and
- making use of tools, like fashioning sticks to help them extract food from tight spaces.

All of this to say that the description that we find in God's word is always credible and there for a purpose. Even the birds of the air respond to their Creator.

But let me make haste to get Elijah to Sidonia after the water in the brook dries up. Sidonia, the very place where Jezebel came from, a place to which she would never think that a man who worshiped Yahweh would flee is the place that God sends him. Elijah was instructed by God to travel to Zarephath, a commercial capital known for its exporting of various goods, including wine, grain, and oil. The town was located on the northern coast of the Mediterranean. Zarephath was also in the midst of a drought.

While in Zarephath, Elijah was used by God to act as God's agent during the drought to care for a widow and her son who cared for him. Because of a widow's response to his request for a drink of water and a little bread cake, she would always have oil and flour in her home during the drought.

Elijah is not only used to provide food during a famine, but there came a day when the widow was sure that she had lost the most precious person in her life.

Her son became ill unto death and quit breathing. She believed that somehow the God of Elijah was punishing her because she worshiped Baal. Elijah took the boy from his mother's arms, carried him upstairs to his room and laid him on the bed. After praying to Yahweh, Elijah performed some kind of resuscitation by laying himself on the boy's body three times. The boy's breath returned, and Elijah laid him, alive, back in his mother's arms. It was the turning point for the woman. The words of the prophet of Yahweh had been demonstrated by action. Now she believed in the God that he talked about.

I think that we can agree that Elijah was a man of extraordinary courage. In spite of the fear that he may have experienced, probably experienced, he entered into threatening situations that would intimidate a person of lesser strength, lesser faith. Elijah had the courage to go against the culture of evil that Ahab and Jezebel had brought to the land of Israel. He had the courage to speak truth to power even though it threatened his very life. Imagine, if you can, that you are one man, one woman, one person, who God sends once again to speak truth to the king and queen of the land, knowing that more than anything else they want to take your life for being such a "troubler" in Israel.

God does not leave Elijah in the widow's home. God sends him back to Ahab and Jezebel! Elijah is persuasive and he sets up a contest between himself and all of the prophets of Baal. The contest will take place on Mount Carmel.

Elijah sets the rules that God places in his mind. The 450 prophets of Baal will build an altar, place wood upon it, place the meat of an ox on the altar, and call upon their god to send down fire to consume it. And they did.

They leaped about the altar, calling on Baal from morning until noon, and nothing happened. Elijah began to mock them, saying, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." So the prophets of Baal cried with a loud voice and cut themselves until blood gushed out of them and they raved at their god. And nothing happened.

Then Elijah rebuilt the altar of the Lord. He

- placed 12 stones around it, one for each of the tribes of Israel,
- placed wood upon it,
- placed the pieces of the ox upon it, and
- poured water upon it three times until the water ran off and filled the trench around the altar.

Then he prayed, "O Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, I am your servant and I have done all that You have asked me to do. Answer me, O Lord, that this people may know that You are Lord and their hearts may be turned back to You again."

Then the fire fell and consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the rocks and the water.

The people declare that the Lord is their God, the prophets of Baal are slain, and Elijah ends the drought by calling for rain.

Elijah is seen as a forerunner of Jesus. Jesus, of course far surpasses him.

There are several comparisons. Elijah is the beneficiary of God's provision of nourishment for people in need. Elijah proclaims that God will sustain the hungry, the widow and her son, despite the meager amount that is available.

Jesus, himself, would feed the multitudes with a surprisingly small amount of food, five loaves and two fish on one occasion, seven loaves and a few small fish on another.

Elijah appeals to God to restore the life of the widow's son and Elijah is used by God to do so. Jesus commands the dead son of the widow of Nain to come back to life and Jesus returns him to his mother. The culmination of the story of Jesus is that He represents the power of God to grant and sustain life. The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate testimony to the triumph of God over death.

Elijah declares to the people that they need to decide who they will worship as God. They cannot hold two gods in equal honor. They must choose. Jesus would teach that "no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and anything else." (Matthew 6:24)

The many signs and miracles that Jesus did reminded the people of Elijah. When Jesus asked the disciples who the people of Israel thought Him to be, one of the answers was Elijah come back to life. It was at the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top that Elijah came to stand with Him representing all the prophets.

The challenges that Elijah and Jesus held out to the people of their day are as relevant to us today as they were then. The names of the gods of today are different from Elijah's time, but they are here today. Make no mistake about it.

The religion of Baal had the goal of seeking security in one's life and in providing all the comforts that one desired in life. One was supposed to enjoy all the pleasures possible while one could do so. Does that sound familiar to anything you know about today?

The challenge that Yahweh held out to followers was, and is, the challenge of a personal relationship. In that relationship we are called to grow and develop as persons and move into the future with faith and hope.

As followers of Jesus, our lives are meant to have purpose beyond ourselves. What we are asked by God to do will, like it was for Elijah, not always be easy.

The choice is ours to make.

Some of those challenges that God holds out to us may include:

- participating in ways that make sure that there is food for everyone,
- helping to get laws passed that insure quality health care for everyone, no matter where they live,
- helping get laws passed so that everyone can afford the medications that they need to maintain their health,
- seeking equality in justice for all people, no matter their financial or social or ethnic standing,
- providing quality education for every student, no matter where they live or their financial ability, or their ethnicity,
- working to get laws passed that will secure the safety of our students, our worshipers, our shoppers, and our neighborhoods from gun violence.

One other thing, and this is perhaps the starting point. Lest you think that I have forgotten about spiritual things, the challenge of the Church today is to be relevant to the challenges that are faced within the world in which all of us live.

Researchers tell us that most persons believe in a God or a higher power or something spiritual that they cannot name. They just don't see today's Church as relevant to their lives. Maybe it is because we in the Church have been more interested in being comfortable and non-confrontational than in being challenged.

I was encouraged when a non-member said to me that they saw the colors of the Ukrainian flag and the sunflowers in our sign before we started work on it. They said that they were glad that we were making a statement to the community.

When we are finished with restoring the sign we must once again make that statement.

One other thing that is a challenge for the Church universal: Elijah knew that he would not be on earth forever. He began a school of prophets who would carry on the work after him. Elisha would become the leader of those prophets after Elijah was carried into heaven. Jesus knew that He would not be on this earth forever. He chose disciples whom He could teach so that they could carry on the mission of God after Jesus returned to heaven.

It is difficult to worship a God about whom one has little or no knowledge. The people of Israel worshiped Baal because they had been taught to do so. The prophets of Baal taught them that there was no need to travel to the Temple at Jerusalem to worship. They could worship just as well at the local altars that the prophets of Baal had built. The early Church knew that there was something important about being together in worship of God and in fellowship with one another. We are responsible for teaching one another and for our own personal learning.

Is being a follower of Jesus and worshipping Yahweh always easy? No! Is anything in life that is a worthwhile challenge always easy? No!

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Today is a day of choice.

Amen.