

## Sermon: June 12, 2022 - 1 Kings 17: 8-16

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, the encounter of the prophet Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath, is a story that invites us to see the big picture, and to come right up close as well.

At first glance, there's just the three characters, a crucial need, and a moral to the story. There's the prophet Elijah, a widow and her son, and the desperate need for food. When a perpetual supply of ingredients is provided by God so that there will be bread throughout the time of drought, the faithfulness of God and those who trust in God is praised.

But as always, there are little details in the story that suggest something bigger. In this case, we note the location - Zarephath, a village which was not in Israel but west of there, between the coastal cities of Sidon and Tyre. There was some nasty political and religious energy between the place where Elijah is from – Israel – and this territory on the Mediterranean coast. Ahaz, the King of Israel, was married to Jezebel, whose father was – wait for it – King of Sidon and Tyre - and many of the priests of Israel had been executed, in favour of the priests of Ba'al, from Sidon and Tyre. Speaking God's anger about these murders, and the ease with which Ahaz turned to other gods, the prophet Elijah has managed to make enemies of both Ahaz and Jezebel, and has been in hiding up in the mountains. His appearance now, in Zarephath, in the middle of enemy territory – is very much a political statement.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century Western viewpoint, questions of religious privilege, patriarchy, classism, and sexism abound in this story as well, as the needs of the older male Prophet are dealt with before the needs of the young widow and her child. A deep dive into the expectations of hospitality in that culture would alleviate some of these concerns, but not all of them.

And if we look at this story within the bigger story of the Bible, this episode has tendrils that reach out to other stories centred around bread: God's provision of manna in the wilderness, sufficient for the day each day; or the feeding of the multitude where a scarcity of fish and barley loaves, once blessed by Jesus and shared, met and exceeded everyone's needs.

I am so thankful that in our Church tradition we are encouraged to approach scripture in this "big picture" way: rather than just assuming we know the meaning, we can go deeper and broader and ask questions of our sacred text without worrying that God will get upset if we do. We bring our inquisitiveness, and the work of historians and archaeologists, political scientists and sociologists, to more accurately place these Bible stories within their own time and place, so that we might discern what they say to us today.

But what strikes me most about this story from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, is not so much these big, "macro" level connections; no, I find myself drawn right in close to this one, the "micro" level. There is this intimate, deeply emotional space that contains the prophet, and the widowed mother, and the child, and as hard as it is to be in that space, today I feel compelled to tarry here awhile.

I suppose a "trigger alert" would be apropos here, for those of you who have the experience of widowhood, for those whose bodies can recall hunger or despair, for any who have lived hand-to-mouth, not knowing where the next meal was coming from. This is a very hard space to be, between Elijah and this mother and son.

Lisa Appelo is a Christian blogger whose words I just discovered this week, and *her* life's story gives a window into this *Biblical* story. Lisa describes herself as "a recent widow and single mom to seven amazing children" and she retells the story like so:

"When Elijah arrived at the Zarephath city gates, he spotted a young widow gathering sticks.

“You can almost hear the despair in this single mom’s words as she told Elijah she had ‘only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it – and die.’ (1 Kings 17:12)

“She was at the end of her hope.”

“Elijah answered: ‘Do not be afraid.’ He instructed her to make a small loaf for him first and afterward, some for herself and her son with this promise from God: the flour jar would not become empty nor the oil jug run dry until the day the Lord sent rain again”. And so it was.

In both the request and the response, we hear a sense of grim reality. The widow had no further resources in sight and had resolved herself to her death and, heartbreakingly, to the death of the child; and into that space comes this seemingly misplaced request for her to offer hospitality one last time. As Lisa puts it, this was a single mom at the end of her hope.

Yet amidst this stark picture of hopelessness, there was hospitality – and there was provision.

We note that the hospitality wasn’t provided because she particularly believed in God. In fact, at one point she refers to “the LORD your God” (verse 12). Your God, Elijah, not my God. So even though we have here Elijah, one of the renowned prophets of Israel, it’s the willingness of this woman outside the Faith to enter into the sacred power of hospitality that opens the door to the ongoing provision of flour and oil. No, it wasn’t “magical” – her actions didn’t conjure this up; rather, there is something so sacred in that kind of sharing.

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of hospitality in that part of the world, then or now. When someone was thirsty, you gave them a drink, when they needed food or shelter, you provided that. There was no “if you had extra to share”, it was simply understood - even when you figured that this nub of flour and splash of oil, was going to be your last meal.

So we have this understanding that to live in this world is integrally connected to the act of sharing – that same sacred space named by Jesus in emphasizing the commandment to “love our neighbour as ourselves.” I remain troubled that Elijah asked for food when things were so dire and yet, in the quiet, desperate moment these three people share, there is also a sense of Divine beauty.

As we sit with these three, we do well to acknowledge that this same exact type of despair is experienced daily in 2022 around the world. People who have nothing left, people who, like this widow, had no family or community supports to act as a safety net. Each time we see something flash across our TV screens or half-hear something awful that has just been reported on radio, each time we see clickbait headlines about the latest attacks or food shortages or human rights violations in the world, those reported events contain thousands of these smaller tragic spaces, like the one inhabited by this mom and her son and Elijah. We picture these small spaces in the world today, where a glimmer of hope is needed, and as we do so we reaffirm the importance of the work done by human rights and humanitarian relief agencies, many with Church support, and we pledge that in our late-pandemic exhaustion we will not turn away from Christ’s call to a peace founded in equity and justice.

Even in the hardest times of life, there is grace: something small, unexpected and life-affirming, often accompanied by a gift of food, or an offer of help. Note that the solution to the widow’s problem is not grand or showy in any way, it’s not a new house and servants and rich foods aplenty. As the story proceeds, we see that she is not shielded from tragedy. No, this is the pledge that there will be enough flour and oil to get her through this day, and then the next day, and then the next day. As she prepares and shares one last life-giving meal (or

at least what she thinks will be her final meal), she receives the gift of grace, one day at a time, signified and sealed in the provision of bread.

We share this morning, in a sacred ritual that goes back some 2000 years: breaking the bread, sharing the fruit of the vine. We do that here in person, we do that with those partaking in communion while watching at home, and we do it in our ongoing commitment to be communities of faith where the grace of our God has space to settle in and do its work, whether times are good or frighteningly bad. As we feed on these symbols of grace, may we invite grace and hope and provision and peace to be with us and between us and to be mobilized through us, to reach with hospitality and hope into the world around us. Amen, and Amen.

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