

1 Kings 17:1-24 - PENTECOST 24 - November 3, 2024

It is much easier to talk about trust - confidence in God's goodness and provision in the face of despair and doubt - than it is to live it. How do we trust God in times of need? Can we have faith even when things seems dark? Today we have three related stories about how God's provision is not ultimate. The brook dries up. The jar of oil is about to run out. The widow's son dies. But then, God provides again. Elijah trusts God, but he must also live on the edge of that trust, knowing that when something else happens, God will again come through.

But, first, let's back up a bit. Events had not gone well for the Israelites. The people of Yahweh had longed for a king, in the way that other nations had kings. A human king. Reluctantly, but with great love, Yahweh had Samuel anoint Saul, and then David, a king for Yahweh's people.

As we move from David and go forward in time, Solomon, David's son, becomes king and builds the temple his father was not allowed to build. Times are bad. King Solomon, after ruling with wisdom and power for years, tanked the United Kingdom of Israel by turning his faith and devotion toward foreign gods. After Solomon's passing, many years and many rulers later, the kingdom was divided with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. King Ahab ruled the northern kingdom of Israel. And Ahab had stopped following Yahweh.

He took a foreign wife, Jezebel, who served the god Ba'al. In the previous chapter we are told, "But Ahab, son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord's sight", and that Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the God of Israel than all the kings of Israel before him. Considering the track record of some of the former kings, this was really bad.

It's important to note that while Ahab was not favoured by God, his rule as king was basically the high point of life in the Northern Kingdom. Things may have been going well for Ahab, but from God's vantage point, things were not at all that great. The Northern Kingdom, is similarly fractured in its devotion to Yahweh, so Elijah declares a drought on the land. King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel were furious and wanted to kill Elijah. It is in this context that the story of the prophet Elijah takes place.

The story begins as Elijah tells King Ahab, "As surely as the LORD the God of Israel lives, the God I serve, there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give my word." After Elijah proclaims his word, God directs him to hide by the Wadi Cherith or Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan. This is about a 30 mile journey from Samaria, not an unsubstantial journey. Cherith is not far from Gilead, Elijah's homeland, so it would have been a familiar place to Elijah. Here, Elijah drinks from the river, and God has commanded ravens provide him food. Ravens are among the birds that God forbids the people of Israel to eat, as they are scavengers, eating dead things, and sometimes searching for nests to eat eggs or young birds.

God's choice of this animal to provide bread and meat for Elijah demonstrates two things: first, that God's manner of provision can be surprising or unusual, and second, that God's command overrides the natural instinct of this creature, making it even more miraculous.

But now, with the lack of rain, even the water in the valley had dried up. At this point, rather oddly, God directs Elijah to go to a small Phoenician town called Zarephath, where he would be fed by a widow. God has commanded a different

source to provide him with food. So, Elijah journeys from east of the Jordan to Zarephath, on the coast south of Sidon, a journey of some fifty or sixty miles. But, Zarephath is not in Israel. It is located in Sidon which was ruled by Jezebel's father. God was sending Elijah into enemy territory to produce bounty in a time of scarcity. But something else was happening as well. Jezebel brought her gods over to Israel. By sending Elijah into Sidon, God was responding in kind through the prophet.

In Zarephath, we meet a destitute woman raising a child during a time of famine. She is nameless, described as a widow, indicating her insignificance and poverty. In the middle east, 3,000 years ago, a widow who had not been redeemed, or taken into the care of a male relative, would have been marginalised and impoverished. In years of plentiful harvest, she would have fed herself and her son through gleaning – picking bits of crops that were left behind in the fields and orchard – grain that had fallen on the ground or olives that had been left unpicked. But the land was in the midst of a famine. There was nothing to glean. And now, all she has left is a small bit of meal and a dribble of oil. She is at the end of her meagre reserves.

So, in the middle of this famine, God directs Elijah, the stranger, to go to a small foreign town to get food from an impoverished widow. The hungry stranger is to ask help of the destitute. Elijah goes, finds the widow gathering sticks - firewood to cook that last meal for her and her son. Elijah tells the widow to bring him some water. Then, when he asks her for a morsel of bread to eat, she says something unexpected. "I swear by the Lord **your** God that I don't have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug." ... "I swear by the Lord, **your** God." Not **my** God or **our** God, but **your** God.

The widow is from the people who follow the god Ba'al. And yet she both knows of Yahweh and pegs Elijah as a follower. She knows that not only is Elijah a stranger to her, but is even more of a stranger, a follower of a different god. And yet she seems to trust Elijah's God.

Elijah had been told by God that God had commanded a widow to feed him, but it would seem that she has not received the message, or didn't understand it. How could she, with what little she had, feed anyone else? She responds poignantly, that she has nothing baked but only a handful of flour and a little oil, and plans on preparing this last meal for herself and her son, "and then my son and I will die." It's hard to believe that Elijah had the audacity to ask - even demand - that the woman give him food.

Perhaps there is a spiritual analogy in how we humans can ask and demand things of God. In other words, trust - at times - can look like audacity.

Elijah responds to the woman's statement with the command often repeated in the Bible: "Don't be afraid." He then continues in the audacious vein by telling her to first make something for him to eat, and then prepare food for herself and her son, but qualifies it with God's promise that the jar of flour and the jug of oil will not be emptied until God sends rain on the earth. They will not be full, so God's provision may not always be overflowing abundance, but they won't run out until God sends rain. At that time, they will be empty; God will then provide in new and different ways. The widow shares her last bit of food with this stranger. And God did as God promised; the widow and her household, along with Elijah, ate for "many days".

The widow initially doubted the prophet's words. This should not be surprising. She had lost her husband. There was a drought and she had little food. She wasn't any different than any of us. It's easy to doubt when one is destitute, living in constant need with no hope in sight. But she learned that Elijah's words had life. He brought food where there was none. And soon she would learn that his words could bring life in a very, big way.

Unexpectedly, the widow's son became ill. Many believe the boy died, but some interpretations believe that he fell into a coma and wasn't breathing. So he might have not died, but death was certainly imminent.

The Bible is full of women weeping for lost children. But this woman isn't ready to sing a dirge just yet. Instead she gets angry with Elijah and demands that he do something. She shouts in her grief that Elijah has entered her house not at all to help her, "O man of God, what have you done to me? Have you come here to point out my sins and kill my son?"

This is a terrible accusation for a couple of reasons. First, the widow makes the assumption that something she has done in her life has brought about the death of her child, a monstrous notion that still plays on the lips of modern Christians as they wrestle with their grief and loss. Second, she blames Elijah, the prophet, as having called her past sin to mind, that awful deed that she now believes has, in effect, murdered her son. Does she see Elijah as so holy and pure that she sees herself as nothing more than a filthy sinner in his light? If so, she then concludes that her son's death was precisely her fault.

Both of these conclusions are frightening in the extreme. People often go on desperate and heartfelt searches for the supposed wrongs they have committed

that have led to the pain, suffering, and death of those they loved. A minister was overheard telling a grieving woman in a hospital ICU waiting room that the reason her husband was dying was because she had led him to attend another church, instead of the only correct church, namely the minister's own.

To imagine that the God we worship is ever on the lookout for ways that our misdeeds might be punished through the demise of those we love makes God out to be little more than a sadist. And, to blame someone else, in this case a person of God, for espousing such a belief and for reminding her of a past deed, that has led to her son's death, is equally horrific. This search for blame is a procedure of despair, pinning on God reasons and actions which we cannot know, and consequently making God ultimately responsible for cruel acts that can turn us away from the worship of this God.

When the widow first met Elijah, she was sceptical. But after seeing the prophet provide for her and her son, she believed that he could do something for her son. Elijah takes the dead boy from his mother, and brings him up to his own room where he takes out his anger on God as he cries to God, essentially asking God, "why?" "Oh, Lord my God, why have you brought tragedy to this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die?" In effect Elijah implies, "Look, God. You sent me to this widow in the first place, and now will you add insult to injury by having her blame me for the death when in fact it is you who has killed him?" It all comes back to this belief, shared by the widow and Elijah, that YHWH is the culprit here, a God who spends divine time evaluating human behaviours and doling out nasty punishments, even the death of innocent children.

In Old Testament theology, God was seen as the one who would give both good

and bad things.

Elijah stretched his body over the child three times begging for God to hear his prayer and spare this child's life. As he stretched himself out on him for the third time, the boy's body grew warm. God hears the prophet's prayer and restores the young child back to life. Elijah takes the resurrected child to his mother. And she announces, "Now I know for sure that you are a man of God, and that Lord truly speaks through you." This final verse of the chapter echoes the first verse, where Elijah explains that there would be no rain or dew aside from his word. The word in Elijah's mouth proves to be true, as is the word of God.

Because Elijah has brought the child back from death, he has proven himself to be a man of God and all he utters can be trusted to be true. This story and the characters in it have not really told the truth about God. They have painted a picture of God that should be rejected completely. God is not in the business of finding ways of punishing human sin by slaughtering loved ones. Nor does God send messengers to announce such terrible claims. Would anyone want any part in such a God or in such a way to view the world in which we live. It is far past time for us to relinquish these antiquated and absurd notions about a God who rewards and punishes our human actions in directly cruel and sadistic ways.

God's provision of life for the dead child, is not ultimate: undoubtedly, the boy will eventually die. The impermanence of God's provisions - the water in the brook, the flour and oil - does not negate their power and goodness, but are part of the difficult and joyful life of trusting God again, and again, and again.

There are a number of themes to be aware of in this passage:

Provision: Elijah had to rely totally on God. When Elijah was on the run from King Ahab, Elijah was taken care of by God. God first provided water from the creek and food delivered by ravens. God then provided again by sending him to the widow of Zarephath. We learn that God is a provider, probably in ways we could never expect.

Hospitality: The woman had every right to kick Elijah out, especially when he was asking for their meagre amount of food. But the woman decided to listen to Elijah and welcomed him into her house. Her actions could remind us that we are called to care for each other even when times are tough.

A God for All: The interactions between Elijah and the woman show us that this God was not just a God for the Israelites, but was a God for all people. This reminder is needed these days: “In a day and age where we’re fiercely divided along religious, political, cultural, and economic lines, and our ability to see all of humanity as a single family is blurred, this story comes to us as a stark reminder that our God crosses each and every barrier we erect. In God there is no Zarephathian or Israelite. His blessings extend to and through all people.” Elijah and the widow were from different cultures and yet were able to help each other.

African philosophy has a concept called “Ubuntu”, which talks about the interconnectedness of humanity. This is how Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes ubuntu : “Ubuntu [...] speaks of the very essence of being human. [We] say... ‘Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other

persons.’ ... A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.”

We have a boundary-crossing, barrier-breaking God, who uses many ways to offer us a model of faithful living in someone, such as the widow, who seems to have so many reasons not to be faithful (not the least of which is that she isn’t even among the tribes of God’s own chosen people)! This is how God moves, working through unexpected people in unexpected ways, transforming the world and breaking down barriers through the lives of unexpected – and even reluctant – servants.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR NOVEMBER 3, 2024

All blessing, honour, and glory, all wisdom, praise, and thanks be yours, God of our salvation! We pray in communion with all the saints on earth and heaven, with the martyrs and the faithful in all ages, and in the name of the Lamb who was slain, who alone is worthy of worship.

We pray for the church, for all denominations large or small, that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for: Lutheran Church of the Cross in Victoria - Rev. Lyndon Sayers, for prison chaplains and their ministries, our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

As severe droughts continue in countries around the world, we pray for farmers, crops, and cattle, for those who thirst and for those who work tirelessly to bring life-giving water to suffering communities.

As our neighbour Americans face the final days of a close presidential race, we pray that the result might bring hope and promise for their country both at home and abroad.

Let your fierce love this day redress the wrongs of all who suffer exploitation, injustice, abuse, neglect, violence or unwarranted imprisonment. Let your nurturing love today encourage those who are gathering, resolve to make tough decisions, take on new responsibilities, or break free from some bondage.

We pray for the provision of systems of justice that are truly fair. Whether they are within our homeland, in other nations, or international courts of justice, may those who are brought to court find equality before the law. Bless with insight and integrity the innocent that they may be exonerated and the hearts of those sentenced turned towards repentance and regeneration.

Let your blessing encourage those who work for peace when the only result seems to be more violence, who preach and live the Gospel in the face of persecution, who feed the hungry although their efforts get misinterpreted, who stand up for the downtrodden in spite of public scorn, and who maintain the church when those around belittle it.

We pray for the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the destitute, the housing of

the homeless, the reformation of prisoners, and the rehabilitation of those who have been addicted to drugs. Bless every agency, church or government, which is dedicated to the care of our disadvantaged sisters and brothers.

Let your healing love be known this day by all who suffer ailment of body, or distress of mind, or agony of spirit Let your intimate love be known today by all who feel forgotten or lost, and all who are walking in the dark valley of despair. Because you treat us with your tender love, we take time to pray for our friends, family members and others who need you more than ever. Pour out your healing on all who need it - especially, Bishop Kathy, Pastor Kristin Steele, and Jean McKain. Be generous with your transforming love for those who need it in their lives.

Gifting God, You give us the gifts of the spirit to use to further your Kingdom and to be the Body of Christ in the world. We take time to remember the people devastated by floods in Spain, fires, drought, and wars: in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, and Sudan. We thank you for the restoration that has already taken place. Empower us to continue to be your hands and feet to continue the work that needs to be done there and in so many other places.

Forgiving God, forgive us for the years of mistreatment of our Indigenous people, for abuse of their land, and for not loving our siblings of different colour, culture, language, and gender orientation. Help us always remember to invite them to your banquet with love. Forgive us for the devastation to your creation, its forests, its land, its birds and animals, its sea and its marine life. Guide us as we work to reverse the damage, and work collaboratively will all nations to address climate change.

God of eternity, bless the saints who have gone before us; grant that their example may inspire us in our ministries and lives today. We give thanks for the love you have shown to the world through all your saints, and we celebrate our continuing communion with them whenever we worship.

Bless us with your healing presence; make us hungry for justice; strengthen our faith; and increase our love for others, especially those we find it most difficult to love.

Amen.

Let us pray ...

Our Father ...