

God is There in the Drought
Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, June 5, 2016
Proper 5, Year C; 1 Kings 17:8-24

1 Kings 17:8-24 (NRSV): *The word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it 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." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.*

After this, the son of the woman, the mistress of the house at Zarephath, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

In the summer, the Old Testament readings that we hear in church are “semi-continuous,” that is, they work their way through a related set of stories, rather than jumping around the Old Testament each week. This summer, for several weeks, the Old Testament readings are stories about the Prophet Elijah from the first book of Kings. Elijah was an important prophet in Israel’s history. He doesn’t have a book named for him, like Isaiah or Jeremiah, but he spoke out at a time when some of Israel’s people turned toward other gods.

Strangely enough, the assigned weekend readings for Elijah do not come in order. Last week, we read from chapter 18, this week is from chapter 17. Next week is from chapter 21, and the following is from chapter 19 (I don’t know quite why they chose to mix up the order like that). So what I would like to do today is set the context for the full story, so that you know where each Sunday’s reading is in the larger story. This is a little different from my typical preaching style, but perhaps you will find it helpful. And as I share Elijah’s story with you, listen for experiences that feel a little like your own experiences. For God has something for you to learn from these stories as well.

Elijah appears in Israel’s history after King David and King Solomon. After Solomon, the kingdom split in two: Israel in the North, with its capital in Samaria, and Judah in the south, with its capital in Jerusalem. One of Israel’s kings was Ahab. Ahab took as his wife, Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the North of Israel. Perhaps this was a valuable alliance with the neighboring country. But Jezebel’s country worshipped other gods, such as Baal. This led to the establishment of Baal worship in Israel.

At this point, in walks Elijah, who confronts the king with this message from The Lord: There will be three years of drought and famine. Immediately afterwards, Elijah flees and the Lord sends him to Zarephath. Interestingly enough, Zarephath is in Sidon, the Baal-worshipping homeland of Jezebel. This is where we hear today's story of Elijah's time with the Widow of Zarephath, where God sustained their food and then raised the woman's son back to life.

After this, Elijah goes back to Ahab and Jezebel for a larger confrontation. This is the story we heard last week: Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal, and demonstrates their weakness and God's great power. The Prophets are defeated, but Elijah is under attack from Ahab and Jezebel. So again, Elijah flees. Elijah is distraught and feels defeated. He goes into the wilderness, and he wishes he were dead, but God sustains him. Then, Elijah climbs Mount Horeb, and God prepares Elijah to hear him. But God's voice does not come in the earthquake, wind or fire, but rather in a still small voice that calls Elijah back to his task—back to Israel to confront Ahab and Jezebel. That story comes in two weeks.

So Elijah returns to Israel and confronts the king and queen, who eventually meet their downfall (you will hear this story next week). But Elijah perseveres, and in doing so, he strengthens the resolve of those in Israel who are faithful to the Lord in this difficult time. Then, Elijah eventually leaves his legacy to the prophet Elisha (that story comes up at the end of the month). Elisha takes up the mantle and boldly continues the call to be faithful to the Lord.

Elijah is known for miracles that God performed through him. Elijah is known for his perseverance against a powerful king and queen. Though Elijah was discouraged, and though he faced some hardships, his ministry kept a faithful remnant strong in Israel—those who would not bow the knee to Baal. Elijah is one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He is an example of great faithfulness to God. What does his faithfulness look like? Elijah's story started not in strength, but in weakness. His story of faithfulness started in the drought we heard about today.

In today's story, the drought that Elijah foretold against Ahab has begun. God sends Elijah to a widow in Zarephath in the country of Sidon. She and her son are in great need because the drought is affecting them. She has a little food left, then, as she says, she and her son will die. But Elijah reassures her that God will sustain them through the whole drought. And each day, God gives them their daily bread.

But then things go from bad to worse. The woman's son dies. She cries out against Elijah—it must be his fault the child died—or perhaps the woman thinks it is her fault, because of her sin. Elijah takes the child and he cries out against God: “Have you brought calamity against this woman by killing her son?”

I am particularly struck by the honesty and sincerity of these two people. They do not offer each other sentimental platitudes as cheap consolation for their loss. They cry out for God's help. Even as Elijah complains to God, he still trusts God to care for the woman and her son—even to raise the boy back to life. So Elijah gets an answer to his question: No! God wants blessing for this woman and her son. So the woman recognizes God's power at work in Elijah, and more than she had acknowledged before, she says “now I know that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

This is more than just a miracle story. Look where this appears in Elijah's life. This is during the drought. Elijah has pronounced judgment on Ahab and Israel, and yet he is impacted by that judgment. So what does faithfulness look like in the drought? When resources are scarce, and when discouragement is high, and when the hardship is not over quickly, what does faithfulness look like?

We hear about this kind of chronic hardship in the news. The people of Syria face violence from three or four armed groups that devastate their country, or they face danger and hardship trying to flee to other countries. Our politics are discouraging for many people, and without an obvious quick fix. In our culture, there are many who are quick to embrace the trendy Baals and scoff at our old fashioned God. In our own lives, we face frustration at old intractable struggles in our lives. Health issues that persist, relationships mired in conflict, challenges in our work that don't seem to go away. What does faithfulness look like in the drought in our lives?

Looking at Elijah, faithfulness looks like several things. Faithfulness looks like steady perseverance. **The challenges of life do not define you, nor do they define God either.** Elijah stays the course, knowing that there is more to the story than the current crisis. Elijah's faithfulness looks like trust, even when that trust is tested. This doesn't mean that Elijah felt fine about the drought or about the boy's death. Elijah was distraught and angry. But Elijah still trusted in God enough to reach out to him, and to ask again for God's healing power. Finally, Elijah's faithfulness looks like watching for God's surprises. You will see this more and more as you hear Elijah's stories.

When Elijah was facing drought not just in the present day, but a drought he knew would last three years, still God gave them each day their daily bread. Each day is a gift from God. No matter how difficult the day may be, each day is a gift from God, with blessings to be found. Each day can bring surprises from God. God can and does heal us as well. We have grown used to healing these days, but perhaps we should be surprised and delighted by God's blessing. Though we will all face loss and illness and our own mortality, God can and does heal us physically. God also heals us emotionally and relationally. God can restore us in heart and mind and in our personal connections, even in a time of drought.

Finally, the biggest of God's surprises is that a drought itself can be an instrument of God's grace and power. We often see hardship and wonder where God is. But God is at work even in the drought. In a time of drought, God brought Elijah to someone who needed him. God cared enough, even for a woman outside of Israel, to send Elijah to be there, just when she needed him to survive the drought, and to heal and revive her son.

Where is your drought? Is there a part of your life that seems to be without God's presence? Look again, and keep looking until you find God at work. God may be renewing you. Or God may just be supporting and sustaining you through a very tough time. But trust that God is there, and that God's faithfulness can support your faithfulness. This is God's grace made perfect in Jesus, who gave himself on the cross, and surprised us with new life from the grave, so that we might have new life in him.

Wherever you are in life, look for God's surprises each day, and trust in his love for you.