

Running on Empty

I Kings 17:8-16

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The next few sermons are based upon texts in the Old Testament book of I Kings that tell of Elijah's ministry. Elijah is the prophet from Tishbite who lived thousands of years ago. The stories of this great prophet are legendary in the memory of Israel. His death was such a mystery that many believed he was simply taken to heaven directly, which led eventually to the belief that Elijah would return to restore Israel sometime in the future. Imagine that Coach John Wooden, rather than passing away this week in the hospital, just disappeared, no body, no grave. With his legendary status as a prophet of the "Pyramid of Success" and his well known faith and love for his wife, he might take on some superhuman qualities in the minds of his followers (at least in LA).

Elijah is represented artistically in our Transfiguration window, present with Moses and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in the New Testament story. Luke records that many thought John the Baptist was Elijah returned, "preparing a way in the wilderness" having come to restore the fortunes of a nation. Others thought Jesus himself was Elijah returning. Some mistook the words of Jesus on the cross in Aramaic, "Eli, Eli, lema sebachthani"¹ to be a cry for help from Elijah. "Eli" means "My God" and "jah" means Yahweh, often translated as Jehovah in Greek. Therefore, the name Elijah means literally, "my God is Yahweh." In fact, Jesus was not calling upon Elijah but was crying out in the word of the Psalmist, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"²

Jesus even referred to our story for today about a Phoenician woman receiving God's grace rather than an Israelite once in his hometown of Nazareth. It apparently so angered the crowd that he was lucky to escape with his life, miraculously walking right through the midst of them. He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."³

¹ Matt. 27:46

² Psalm 22:1

³ Luke 4:24

So you may appreciate why I'm a little hesitant this morning to bring this story up for our consideration. If Jesus was run out of town when he brought it up, what chance do I have? The word of the Lord that came that day long ago didn't come in the Temple to the priests or to the King. And it didn't come to those dressed in fine robes and golden crowns. It came surprisingly to a desperate woman (a foreigner at that!) hanging onto life by the skin of her teeth. Often that is precisely how God's grace comes to us - most surprisingly when we are desperate.

This is a story about scarcity and God's provision for those who are in need. My first reaction to the story is to realize that I really know very little about scarcity. I've rarely missed a meal. I bet we could live for several months off the food we have stored in our cupboards right now. I used to get such a chuckle out of our neighbors in New Jersey. Whenever the forecast predicted a big snowstorm the shelves in the grocery store were emptied by the over-anxious just in case the plows might take a day or two to clear the streets.

As a culture, we seem to have the opposite problem of scarcity. We live with abundance and the self-indulgence that often goes with it. We consume so much – too much in fact that it compromises our own health and life. Most of us simply can't relate experientially to this woman who had so little left that she came to the conclusion that life was over for her and her family.

As I was typing these words, I looked across my computer screen to see faces of those who know scarcity in abundance. My screen background is a picture I took from the pulpit of a church in Malawi two years ago: a reminder to me of the needs of others, of my own privilege and the responsibilities that go with such blessings. I was honored to travel to Africa with a team of people from this congregation to work alongside our brothers and sisters of faith with the NKoma Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa. On my computer screen is a picture taken of the congregation of 500 or so in one of the remote rural churches. They know scarcity! When they read this story, I imagine it is not difficult to identify with the widow who is preparing her last meal and without hope for the future. They know how devastating a drought of three years can be; when crops fail for lack of rain and whole communities are starving and mothers must choose which child they will feed and which must go without needed nutrition that day. Can you imagine having to triage your own children? Most of us know nothing of that kind of scarcity.

But there is more than one way to be hungry in life; more than one way to be hungry for life! We all come to the end of our own resources in the face of life's challenges when we must decide in which direction we will seek that which can sustain us. What deserves our ultimate allegiance? From where will we seek help? Upon what philosophy or world view will we come to rely? What truth will preserve us; what foundation is reliable enough to stand upon when all else has fallen? Surely life comes sooner or later to a last supper somewhere for us, too.

Perhaps you may have heard a diagnosis in a doctor's office that brought your world crashing in. Maybe you received a "pink slip" or heard that you were "being let go" in your boss' office. Possibly you received a visit from the police with news of an accident, or a phone call with the news of the death of someone so close to you that you still can't imagine living without them. As devastating as it can be to face things beyond our control, it can be even more devastating to experience pain when it is within someone's control. A spouse's unfaithfulness, a child's estrangement, a parent's disapproving rejection can leave one so starved for love, so hopeless about the future, so devastated that life itself seems no longer conceivable, no longer worth the effort. We may not know the famine and empty cupboards of the widow of Zaphath, but we know scarcity alright! We know emptiness alright! We know hunger for something we cannot produce in ourselves. To what do we turn when life caves in? That is the question of this text.

Will we put our trust in the lesser gods of success, the idols of wealth, the power of positive thinking? Or does our help come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth?⁴

Elijah found a woman by a well long ago. A widow, living with such scarcity of resources that all she could manage was to collect a few sticks in order to prepare a last supper for her son and herself. A three-year drought left the countryside barren, her cupboards barren, and her hope for the future barren. And then into her barren, empty, starving situation, the word of the Lord came to bring life. That Word still comes to those who search for it. Miraculously, she and her son were sustained by an unending supply of that which nourishes life from the Lord just when she was convinced life was empty.

Once in a new member class, we were going around the circle responding to the question, "When in life did God become more than a concept or idea for you?" One

⁴ Psalm 121:2

woman described a conversation she had during a particularly difficult period of her life with her pastor. She wondered why God wasn't more helpful, why God didn't do something miraculous to change her circumstances. The pastor replied something like, "you're making it today aren't you?" She realized that though life felt void of the life and love she sought, she was daily receiving enough to manage. Her jar and cupboard appeared empty but each day she discovered again, "God's mercies are new everyday!"

Like Elijah, Jesus also met a woman at a well.⁵ And she too was not acceptable for she was a Samaritan, a half-breed. "Give me a drink" he asked her. To which she replied, "How is it that you, a Jew, can ask a drink of me?" And Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. . . those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty . . . because the water I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The Word of the Lord brings with it abundance within that which can sustain us through every trial and challenge of life. Like manna from heaven, we often only get enough for the day so we learn to depend upon the Lord's provision rather than our great skill at collecting. There is spiritual food for the journey just when you think you are at the end of what is possible. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Give us this day our daily bread" we affirm our daily dependence upon the one known as the Word of God incarnate. "The Word became flesh and lived among us."⁶

Therefore, we come to this table – The Lord's Table – and it is here that we receive nourishment for life from God who creates it and is always on the side of life. The Lord meets us like the woman at Zaraphath, in our desperation with food for the journey. Amen.

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

⁵ John 4

⁶ John 1:14