



“The Wildman and the Widow”
Scripture – 1 Kings 17:8-16
Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 10, 2016

Let me tell you a story. It’s the story of a Wildman and a Widow – unlikely strangers whom the Living Lord brings together in a season of death. It’s the story of an Israelite and a foreigner, who – by the grace of God – deliver each other from desperation to hope. It’s the story of two people whom God has called – one a prophet, the other a woman at the end of her rope – who find life in the hand of the other.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

In the days of King Ahab, there was a Prophet of God whose name was Elijah. You’ve heard of Elijah ... he’s one of the most memorable figures of the Old Testament – a ‘wonder-worker’ who is, perhaps, best known for his flair for pyro-technics: There was his defeat of the Prophets of Ba’al (when he called upon God to rain down fire on Mt. Carmel), and his theatrical ascent into heaven (complete with whirlwind and chariots of fire). Of course, that all happens later ... our story comes at the *beginning* of his ministry.

Like other prophets in ancient Israel, Elijah had the unfortunate task of speaking truth to power. The first time we meet him, he is standing before Ahab, warning the king of the years’-long drought and famine that is to come. Quite frankly, this dry-spell should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the Lord’s no-nonsense policy on idolatry. In this case, famine is the consequence of Ahab marrying a Sidonian princess named Jezebel, and setting up an altar to the false god she worships. However, as we might expect, the king and queen do not take kindly to Elijah’s warning. So the prophet makes a run for it ... God sends Elijah to a stream east of the Jordan, saying: “You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there” (1 Kgs 17:4). Elijah does as the Lord commands; he lives for weeks or months on water from the stream and bread the ravens deliver. But then the wadi dries up, leaving Elijah desperate, waiting and watching for God’s next move.

And that’s where this story begins – the story of the Wildman and the Widow.

As you have already heard, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah as he sits beside that dried up riverbed: “Go,” says the Lord. “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

It is a surprising command – not that God would send Elijah packing in order to find food in the midst of famine ... that’s not surprising. But that God would send Elijah to Zarephath, to a city on Jezebel’s home turf. It does not seem a likely place for a prophet of God to find refuge from the king and queen and the drought that plagues them all.

And, then there's the matter of the widow. Why would God send Elijah to a widow? – to a woman whose only source of food would be the scraps left in the field after the harvest (if there'd even been one that year). With no husband to support her, this widow would be among the most vulnerable of Sidonian society ... not a person you'd seek out when in dire need of food ... But Elijah has already seen God's provision in unlikely places, so – without protest – he begins the long journey to Zarephath.

After weeks or months of travel (beyond the Jordan, past the Sea of Galilee, and – finally – to the Mediterranean coast), Elijah emerges from the wilderness. This “hairy man with a leather belt” (2 Kgs 1:8), as he is later described, surely looks as wild as ever ... I imagine him disheveled from his journey and ravenous – desperate for food and overcome with thirst – as he approaches Zarephath in pursuit of promised provision.

And, lo and behold, there she is! Right there at the city gate – the widow of whom God spoke. How Elijah knows this is *the* widow, we do not know ... But he trusts this woman can help him. “Bring me a little water,” he calls to her. Whether out of obedience to God's plan, or societal duty to welcome strangers, or just compassion for a weary traveler, she runs to fetch some water.

But, before she can bring it, Elijah calls to her again: “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” For Elijah, who has survived for weeks or months off bread from the ravens, this request is nothing more than a confession of faith, an abiding belief that the God who brought him to Zarephath, will – indeed – sustain him by this widow's hand. But, for the widow, this request pushes the limits of her hospitality.

Perhaps the widow does not know of her part in the divine plan – that God has called her to sustain Elijah in this season of drought. Perhaps she does not believe the Lord will work through her to bear God's blessing to a world plagued by famine. For, upon hearing Elijah's words, she crumples under the weight of her plight. “As the Lord your God lives,” she says, “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.”

At this moment, all seems hopeless for the Wildman and the Widow, two strangers who share the same hunger. All *would* seem hopeless, that is, if it weren't for one, small word of hope – a word of hope that is easily overlooked amid the desperation that floods the scene. “As the Lord your God lives,” she exclaims.

Maybe she does not (yet) know of God's promise to sustain life in a season of death. Or, maybe she had not dared to hope before she saw Elijah emerge from the wilderness. But, somehow ... somehow, in this encounter, she knows the one true God lives, and that – *as the Lord lives* – there is hope for a future.

“Do not be afraid,” Elijah says – uttering those oft-repeated words of Scripture that remind us, over and again, that God is faithful – even when the jar is empty and the jug has run dry. “Do not be afraid,” the prophet says, for all is not lost. “Do not be afraid ... For thus says the Lord: 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.” With these words, the Wildman assures the Widow not only that God will provide, but that the Living Lord will work through her to sustain life. ‘You have a part to play,’ Elijah says. ‘Your hands are not empty. Trust that the Lord will multiply your meager resources into a feast that will sustain, not only today, but for weeks and months to come.’

And so, the Lord delivers the Wildman and the Widow from their desperate hunger – from the famine that threatens all life. The Lord transforms scarcity into abundance, as the Hebrew text tells us, “according to the word of the Lord that he spoke *in the hand* of Elijah.” *In the hand of Elijah*. It's just an expression – a phrase that gets lost in translation. But I think it's significant. You see, they each have something to offer. Both the Wildman and the Widow, the prophet of the Lord and the unlikely hostess, both hold in their hands something to sustain life in

a season of death. She brings a morsel of bread, ready to be multiplied; he brings good news of the Lord's promise to provide. And, in the hands of God, these meager offerings become blessings that nourish, that satisfy. Herein lies the miracle of this story ... That God works through unlikely strangers to deliver each other; that God draws both the Wildman and the Widow into God's salvific work. And together, through gifts transformed by the grace of God, they both receive daily bread – enough to sustain life.

Let me tell you another story – one that is far less miraculous (at least on the surface) but that is no less profound. It's the story of a pastor named Thomas and his unconventional congregation ... if you can even call it that.¹ It's the story of people God has called – one a man of the cloth, the others unlikely prophets – who find life in their presence to one another.

Once a week, Thomas puts on his clergy collar and heads down to a local coffee shop, where he sets out a sign that reads: "Free Prayer." And people stop to pray with him – every. single. time.

It says something about the world in which we live ... our communities might not be plagued by drought. But many of us are desperate for a word that sustains life in a season of death, a season that has become even more acute this past week. I imagine many of us, like the Widow of Zarephath, can't even name our despair until we encounter someone who helps us dare to hope. Someone – as *this* story goes – like a man of God who has emerged from his church office to serve strangers at a coffee shop ...

Thomas describes one such stranger: Amari, a man whose eyes filled with tears when he read that sign reading, "Free Prayer."

"I heard all the unuttered prayers and pains he had held inside for two years," Thomas writes of their conversation. "His wife had experienced an identity crisis and left him. A dear friend had died from a blood clot. An aunt had died from medical malpractice. Another friend had died from an overdose. Finally, death had taken his sister. Death had hollowed out Amari's spirit, and he had spoken about it to no one. 'Then I read those words, 'Free Prayer,' he said, 'and I couldn't keep it in anymore.' And in that moment, in that encounter, hope began to seep into the spaces where only despair had lived."

But, it is not only those whom Thomas offers to hold in prayer who find grace in the encounter.

"Though I offer prayers for others," Thomas writes, "the blessings have also come to me ... 'I recall when a man sat down and requested prayer for a friend undergoing heart surgery. I asked whether he'd like to start the prayer. He began, 'Dear God, I thank you for Thomas. Thank you for giving him courage to offer prayer in this place ...' Heaven embraced me with that prayer," Thomas says. "I was second guessing my [gifts for ministry]. Then a stranger prayed for me, and I felt, as least in that moment, that I was doing something right."

"Sometimes," Thomas concludes, "we have to move beyond the shadows of a steeple to take care of our people. And in so doing we may just find that God takes care of us, too."

Thomas, with his sign that reads "Free Prayer," and the strangers he meets in the coffee shop all have something to offer. The man who wears his calling on his sleeve, and those whose callings are a little less obvious, all hold in hand something to sustain life in a season of death. It may not be a morsel of bread or a prophetic word, but these strangers offer prayers of blessing, messages of hope, an abiding faith in the Living Lord, a sustaining word of promise that defies our culture of death and despair. It's a different sort of sustenance, but in the hands of God, these encounters still become blessings that nourish, that satisfy. Herein lies the miracle of this story ... of this life ... that God works through us to deliver one another, that we all have a part to play in God's salvific work.

Wherever this week has brought you, remember the gift of grace God has given us in each other. Whether we stumble out of the wilderness looking for the bread of life, or we are carefully measuring out our few resources to survive another precarious day, God's love holds promise for us. Elijah brought a word of reassurance we all long to hear: Do not be afraid; God provides. As we reach out to one another, love seeps in to transform desperate times. What do you hold in your hand, to offer another? Whatever it is, offer it freely. And may God use your gift to sustain life and nurture hope.

NOTES

1. Rev. Thomas Rusert, "Why I Offer 'Free Prayer' in a Coffee Shop," <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/6670/why-i-offer-free-prayer-in-a-coffee-shop>

Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly

Loving and gracious God, we come to you this morning with so much on our minds and hearts. We have so many questions – so much with which we struggle. Time and time again our nation and our city face the pain and tragedy of gun violence, brutality and racism. Time and time again we struggle to understand how the forces of evil seem to win. And, we find ourselves asking, as did the Psalmist, "How long O Lord? How long?"

And yet... and yet... your hope and your truth stand tall and strong for those who will listen, for those who seek to understand the deepest truths of life. Allow us to listen for the assurance that only you can give; enable us to feel your spirit and to see your goodness. In these days which are so often so dark and so sad, help us to remember your clear word that love is stronger than hate. Remind us that nothing, nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Enable us to hear, to see and to live your truth. Help us to remember that love will not and cannot be vanquished – that as we heard the scripture that was read this morning, "the jar of meal shall not be spent, and that the jug of oil shall not fail."

O God, despite our pain, despite our sadness, which are real and which are right, enable us to renew our commitment to justice, to peace, to the unquenchable, undying power of love. Enable us to recommit ourselves to your ways and to be living, active beacons for the love evidenced so completely by Jesus.

This we ask, O God, along with the prayers of our individual hearts, in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.