

Elijah's Promise

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, (8Nov), 2009.

Text: 1Kings 17:14

“For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, ‘The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’”

At the Rotary Club a month ago we had a speaker from the New Jersey Food Bank, the statewide organization that warehouses donated foods and distributes to all the local food banks in the state. She told us about their programs, one of which is called *Elijah's Promise*. A Rotarian asked her about the name and she seemed stumped. The Rotarian asked if it had to do with the Biblical prophet Elijah. She said, “Yes, I think so, but I’m not sure what the promise is.” Everyone turned to yours truly and I said, I guessed it had to do with the story in the Bible when Elijah helped a poor widow during a drought. He promised her jar of flour and cruse of oil would miraculously stay filled. The Rotarians looked at me with new found respect. “What do you want?” I asked, “it’s in the Bible and that’s my stock-in-trade!”

It is an intriguing story particularly in our time (*and in this church*). Elijah announced to King Ahab that God would send a famine because of divine displeasure against Ahab and his queen Jezebel.¹ For a while, Elijah lived in hiding but soon the waters in the wilderness also dried up. God told his prophet to go to Zarephath in the region of Sidon where God had convinced a poor widow to feed him. It seems from the story that the widow might not have been completely sold on the idea. When Elijah met her at the gate of the town and asked her for food she told him times were tough, real tough.

As the LORD 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.²

One wonders how Elijah had the chutzpah to press his request. But he persisted because he trusted God’s word that the widow could and would help him. In helping him, Elijah believed she could help the cause of God. As he asked again, he made the promise 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.³

¹ 1Kings 17:1.

² 1Kings 17:12.

³ 1Kings 17:13-14.

Did she know he was a true prophet? The text does not say but we presume—though this was a Gentile area—that she had faith in the LORD.⁴ She did what he asked of her. Let us put it starkly, she made a real sacrifice for the man of God, a sacrifice that many would not have made. So far so good, and miraculously the jar and the cruse did not run out.⁵ Then her child became ill. She had given Elijah a room in her house by this point⁶ and she complained bitterly to him about the unfairness of God and her son’s illness. The son was so sick he had ‘*no breath left in him.*’⁷ Now the Prophet must have felt real guilt. He took the boy in his arms and prayed for him with a heartfelt plea for mercy. When the prayer was answered, the widow certainly had faith. In tears and gratitude she blurted out, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth.”⁸

At first the story seems to describe standard, garden-variety Biblical miracles: the feeding and then the healing. But the widow’s sacrifice for Elijah jumps off the page at me. Feeding him seems to be a sign of her faith and in some way triggers the miracle. No one in the entire region had food. Everyone’s pantry was empty. The drought pushed Israel and all her neighbors into a wasting starvation. All she had was the one bit of meal and few tablespoons of oil, and that was it. It was to be a last supper. Still she was willing to share her meager portion with the prophet. Why? We could be cynical and say she knew she was going to die anyway so why not? But that is not the answer. *Better*: what if we say God worked a miracle in her heart first allowing her to risk the sacrifice? That spark of faith motivated her sacrifice and saved her and her son.

A widow with children was among the most vulnerable in that society. She would have been almost completely at the mercy of things like that drought. Twice desperate, she was at the point of giving up: once because of the lack of food and second at the near-death of her son. Yet she was willing to make a sacrifice for Elijah. I am reminded of a figure in the New Testament. Jesus and his disciples sat in the great Temple in Jerusalem watching people bring lavish gifts. The disciples were amazed by the material grandeur of the Temple and the large gifts that supported it.⁹ But Jesus took note of none of that, only a poor widow who put in two copper coins into an offering basin. “I tell you,” he taught the disciples, “this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had.”¹⁰ There is something about true sacrifice and God.

We assume that both widows had great faith, and the extraordinary faith enabled them to sacrifice for Elijah and for the Temple. But if they did, it was all they had. The reality was more nuanced than that. It was in the sacrifice that their faith and their relationship with God grew. It is the evidence that they sought a closer connection to God, not evidence that they already had great faith. In making the sacrifice, God honored the request. There is always great power when you team with God. Most of the time, even Elijah rarely knew that kind of power. He was more often on the run as he was in this story. His prayers do not reveal a person who had much more

⁴ Zarephath belonged to the King of Sidon, a Philistine area. However, the text includes that she used the Hebrew name of God.

⁵ 1Kings 17:16.

⁶ 1Kings 17:20

⁷ 1Kings 17:17.

⁸ 1Kings 17:24.

⁹ Luke 21:5.

¹⁰ Luke 21:1-4 and also Mark 12:41-44.

than a simple, humble faith.¹¹ Without the widow of Zarephath, his whole grand faith would have come crashing down. Without her sacrifice, where would he have been?

It is only natural to assume these two, the widow and Elijah, had faith all buttoned down. But faith is never so clear cut. It requires steps that we aren't sure about. It is not until we step out on a limb as the widow did that we discover the truth of God's promise. It requires a leap into the dark not knowing for sure God is there to catch you. But, as she and Elijah discovered, 'underneath are the everlasting arms.'¹²

Just think of her fear and at least give it equal status with her faith. She believed she and her son had reached the end of the road. At that point of desperation, she shared her bread with this stranger who said he was a prophet. That is faith. But don't stop there! Note not just Elijah's promise but also the evidence of God's provision! If we do not know for certain God's providence, in these later days many of us have come to know the widow's anxiety about our futures, about money, about our things. Not nearly so drastic as her situation, but fear is fear. And it can cause us to hold back from a sacrifice.

Some of you will say, "*But it was different for her—she had this big Old Testament prophet making grand promises to her. I don't.*" Why do you assume this promise of Elijah is only to a poor widow in Zarephath, and not also to you, to me, to us, to this church?

End

Elijahs Promise.DOC

¹¹ Note, for example, his prayer for the widow's son in 1Kings 17:20.

¹² Deuteronomy 33:27.