

1 Kings 17:8–16 (Tanakh)

And the word of the Lord came to him: “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon, and stay there; I have designated a widow there to feed you.” So he went at once to Zarephath. When he came to the entrance of the town, a widow was there gathering wood. He called out to her, “Please bring me a little water in your pitcher, and let me drink.” As she went to fetch it, he called out to her, “Please bring along a piece of bread for me.” “As the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I have nothing baked, nothing but a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am just gathering a couple of sticks, so that I can go home and prepare it for me and my son; we shall eat it and then we shall die.” “Don’t be afraid,” said Elijah to her. “Go and do as you have said; but first make me a small cake from what you have there, and bring it out to me; then make some for yourself and your son. For thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: The jar of flour shall not give out and the jug of oil shall not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the ground.” She went and did as Elijah had spoken, and she and he and her household had food for a long time. The jar of flour did not give out, nor did the jug of oil fail, just as the Lord had spoken through Elijah.

## Today We Eat

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 5, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8–16

We are at the very beginning of the story of Elijah. In the verses just before today's reading we are introduced to Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Tishbe in Gilead. [Slide 1] The first thing we know about him is that he goes to King Ahab and says that as sure as the Lord Elijah serves lives, there will be no rain, not even dew in the land, until the Lord allows it.

You guessed it. The Lord is in a foul mood. Since the death of Solomon there has been one bad king after another. The bible tells us that the current king, "Ahab ... did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him." Among the worst things that Ahab did was marry Jezebel. Jezebel came from way up in Sidon, [Slide 2] where they worshipped Baal and Asherah, not the one true God. And worse, Ahab converted to Jezebel's faith and abandoned the God of Israel. Jezebel led Ahab so far astray that through the ages her name has come to mean a woman who misleads the saints of God into sins of idolatry and sexual immorality. In modern usage, the name of Jezebel is sometimes used as a synonym for sexually promiscuous and/or controlling women.<sup>1</sup>

God is furious with Ahab, hence the drought that Elijah promises the king. Then God sends Elijah into the heart of the pestilence. God tells Elijah to go to Sidon, the very geographic center of the corruption. God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath [Slide 3] and there the prophet will find a widow. The widow, God says, has been designated to feed Elijah in the midst of the drought.

Elijah goes to Zarephath and finds the widow as he is told. Elijah asks her for water, and she gives him water. Elijah then asks her for food. The widow balks. She has only enough food for one meal for herself and her son. She plans for the two of them to eat a final meal together and then to die of starvation together. [Placeholder Slide]

Here we should return to what God appointed or designated the widow to do. Before Elijah went to Zarephath, he was told that the widow had been designated to feed him. Many translations, including the one in our pews, the NRSV, say that God had commanded the widow to feed Elijah. It makes a difference. Did the widow willfully disobey God? The widow shows no evidence of having heard the command. There's no evidence that the widow is defying God. The Tanakh, among others, translates the word a little better, I think. The Tanakh says that God designated the widow to feed Elijah. Another translation says God appointed her.

It's a small point, I suppose, but the idea that God chose the widow rather than that God told her and she disobeyed is far less distracting. The story is not about disobedience. The story is a straightforward human drama. The widow is a very human character. She is preparing to die of starvation along with her son. One can hardly help but recall the heartbreak of Hagar in the desert. Hagar puts her infant in the shade and turns away unable to look upon the dying moments of her only child. One can hardly help but think of Abraham wrenched by God's incomprehensible command to sacrifice his only son. The widow is preparing for the

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

unthinkable—one more meager meal and she will die a painful death made unmeasurably more painful by witnessing the pain of her son.

The widow is very human. She tells Elijah, we have but enough food for one small meal and then we prepare to die. There's no deception, only resignation. She might have said, "Please leave us in peace in this most tormenting and private moment." Her response is perfectly natural and acceptable.

There is a similar story I heard recently. It happened in some war torn and famished land; I've forgotten where. Three refugees were wandering by themselves, a mother and her son and another woman, a stranger. Like the widow in our passage the food was running out. The woman with a child had enough food for two days. The other woman had run out entirely. The woman who had the food offered to share the meal among the three of them. The other woman objected. She said, "No, you and your son should eat a portion and save another portion for tomorrow. That way, you'll have two days to find more food."

But the woman with the food retorted, "No. Today we eat together. Tomorrow we look for food together."

It's a poignant story, I think. It conveys the woman's belief that we're all in this together. By her actions she was saying, "It's not right for us to eat and let you go hungry." The woman realized something else, as well. She realized that the three of them working together for their common survival made them much stronger than they would be each on their own. "Today we eat together. Tomorrow we search for food together."

At first glance the main point of the story of Elijah and the widow seems to be about whose God is more powerful. Elijah rebukes Ahab for his apostasy with Jezebel, promises famine in the land, and then sends the prophet into Jezebel's homeland to meet the widow. In a sense the story is a precursor to the famous one that follows a few chapters later. A few chapters later Elijah and the prophets of Baal will enter a wager as to whose God is more powerful. Two alters will be drenched with water. The prophets of Baal will chant and parade and call out for fire to come and dry the wood and burst it into flames. They will fail. Elijah will call on God, and the wood will jump into flame. The God of Israel will be proven more powerful.

At first glance the story of the widow is the same. The widow and her son are about to die. The drought and famine are relentless. Jezebel's Gods are powerless. Elijah comes on the scene and asks the woman for food. As we've seen she demurs. But Elijah promises that his God will make sure the flour and oil will never go empty. She will have plenty until the drought is over. The woman shares the meal with Elijah, and sure enough the flour and oil remain abundant. The God of Israel is more capable the Gods of Sidon.

There's no doubt that this is a part of the story, a large part. But there is more to it. In ancient Israelite culture widows were among the most vulnerable in the whole population. That's why brothers were required to marry their brother's wife if one of the brothers died. Known as the Nazarite vow, it was meant to protect the brother's widow from a life of poverty. Widows in ancient Israel were often mentioned together with orphans. Biblical ethics demanded that the people look after the widows and orphans.

It was not accidental that God sent Elijah to a widow in Zarephath. God intended to put on a display of power, but God also intended to put on a display of compassion. The God of Israel would care for the widow and her son.

But God wasn't simply putting Godly power and compassion on display. God also intended to demonstrate that the survival of the widow and her son would depend on a few important things. She would have to be generous, generous in the face of scarcity. She would

have to give up what little control of the situation she had. She would have to have faith beyond any reasonable evidence. She would have to trust Elijah. In return for her generosity and trust, the woman would no longer be on her own. As in the modern story, “Today we eat together. Tomorrow together we deal with what the day brings.” Because the widow had compassion, faith and trust, her tomorrows were filled with abundance.

I must say something very important at this point. I have known most of you for a very long time. And I know that there have been times in all your lives when you have sacrificed a lot to be generous and compassionate. I’ve seen it plenty of times with my own eyes. And we know that in many of those times things didn’t end the way you had hoped. The meal and oil ran out, so to speak. The job didn’t come through, the illness did not abate, the addiction was not cured, and the relationship broke apart anyway. Sometimes you were taken advantage of because you were generous and trusting. In other words you have done everything you were supposed to, and you ran into the horrible truth that bad things happen to good people. Rabbi Kushner’s book of like title and I hope my sermon of two weeks ago can help us grapple with that reality.

The important thing is that bad things do happen to good people. Sometimes you have been generous and compassionate and faithful—you’ve been good—and nonetheless you reaped bad things. For what little consolation it is, the bad things didn’t happen because you weren’t as good as you thought you were. The prosperity gospel or any gospel that tells you that all you need to do is get right with God and everything will come up roses, is at the end of the day a hard-hearted and false gospel.

But here’s something else that’s important. More often than not if you are kind and generous, compassionate and faithful, it will go better. It will go better because this is the kind of world our God intends to create. With God’s help and in sync with God’s hope for us, better things will be more likely to happen than if we are greedy and mean-spirited. And as important, if we are generous and kind, compassionate and faithful, we will more likely build a community of people that will help one another even in the most difficult of times. Even in dire scarcity, maybe never more than in dire scarcity, generosity and compassion are life-giving and life-saving. “Today we eat together. Tomorrow, together, we deal with what the day brings.” It’s a better way to go. Amen.