

*Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-16 17-24; Luke: 4:24-26*

*Subject: Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*

*Theme: A Living Faith*

*All Saints Sunday; Nov. 1, 2020; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Last night we reluctantly set the clock back an hour. I say reluctantly, not because I don't need an extra hour of sleep, or because of the hassle of climbing up to the chime room at the church so the bells don't go off too early, or to bemoan the fact that it's pitch dark at 5:30pm. But it's because this year, more than most, I hear people saying they'd rather not add an extra hour to 2020. We're ready for this difficult year to be done - ready for better days - some good news to celebrate and some space to rejoice with the ones we love. We've missed out on work, birthdays, weddings, trips, sporting events, concerts and more. We've had to say sad goodbye to members of our church family and our own families from a distance. So many are stuck in despair, hunger, pain, and sickness. We want this suffering to come to an end. But the truth is that the flip of a calendar page isn't going to make all things new. A vaccine isn't going to take it all away. Nor will an election solve all the problems we face as human beings living in this world together. What will it take for us to get through this drought - this, our extended period of grief and loss?

The story of Elijah begins abruptly. He comes out of literally nowhere. This is the first time we hear about this prophet from an unknown town on the edge of the northern kingdom of Israel. About 100 years after King Solomon, Ahab became King, married Jezebel, who worshipped other gods. She was a worshipper of Baal, who was thought to be the god of thunderstorms, who gave rain. Elijah came to remind King Ahab of the

true God, who was going to bring about a drought in Israel. Then, God sent Elijah out into the wilderness, where ravens would bring him bread and meat, and he would drink from the wadi, the ravine that held water during the rainy seasons. This is more than even a prophet could have expected - meat every day? That was a rare thing - it calls to mind the quail and mana in the Exodus story, and the amazing way that God provides for people. Ravens were considered unclean, but God even uses them to feed Elijah. He was really living it up, for a while. But, when there's no rain, the wadi dries up, and that's exactly what happened. So God sent Elijah on a 4-5 day walk, to the town of Zarephath to see a widow, who had no one else to provide for her and her young son. They too, had run out of food, and were preparing their last meal, before they would likely starve to death.

They didn't know Elijah's God. She didn't have meat and bread - just a little meal, and a little oil, and nothing to look forward to. They had no where to turn, no hope for deliverance, and had given up. Then Elijah comes along asking for a cake. He gives them words often repeated in scripture, that powerful greeting of an angel - a word from heaven, "Do not be afraid." He must have been convincing - maybe she recognized something in him that made her believe he could help. Maybe the widow and her son were waiting for one more option, some place to hang their hope, and had enough energy for one last effort. He tells them, "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."

In many of the stories of the Bible when we meet a widow, we know they are women of great faith. There were likely widows of means in some places, ones who had

a home, or could provide for themselves, or even act as benefactors for Paul and even Jesus himself. But for the most part - widows have *nothing but faith*. They are ones on the margins of society, like Naomi and Ruth, just trying to make their way through life with help from others. This unnamed widow takes the word of the prophet, and does what he asks, and a little miracle happens. It's not dramatic, there's no opening of the heavens - no angelic chorus. But there is enough bread. There is enough oil. The three of them can eat and live.

We'd like to see some big miracle in our lives. We, who live in this desert, and haven't seen rain here for over 194 days are longing for that and more. Many here are out of work: they want to serve guests, clean rooms, set up conventions, welcome visitors, teach children. This holding pattern has gone on too long, and it has the potential to break us down in mind, body, and spirit. Some have wanted to give up. Others are able to trust that there will be new life here, even if it won't be like it was before. Can we hope to make it through? We will - little by little, helping one another along way, doing what we can to protect each other, holding onto hope for our future together, for our community, for our families, and for our city. God is working even when we cannot see it. This is living faith.

When things are difficult, sometimes our first instinct is to find a reason - someone or something to blame. This is hurtful and dangerous. We turn neighbors into scapegoats, and bear false witness. The truth is that bad things happen. Sometimes the river dries up. Sometimes people get sick. Sometimes they die. God's promise to provide and protect comes through in ways we don't always expect. We find a new career, some difficult event brings us closer together, some conflicts help us to see

ourselves in new ways, and the endurance we rely on to get us through in tough times becomes part of a resilient spirit that lives on in generations to come. We endure, we learn, and we live.

After a while the widow's son became ill. There was no breath left in him. He couldn't breathe. And the boy's mother was mad. She blamed Elijah for bringing her to God's attention - surely God remembered some sin of hers, and that's why this happened. It's as if she believes that she could have just stayed under the radar, and the boy would have been okay. But the prophet would demonstrate God's power again, saying, "Give the boy to me." She trusted him once more, and Elijah prays. He asks the Lord to return the boy's life, and God responds. The boy is resurrected, and the widow is assured that Elijah speaks for the one true God.

We have questions. Like, why did they have to suffer hunger, and have a near-death experience? What about all the other widows and their children? What about others who starved during the drought? When will our pain of unemployment, illness, conflict, and violence, come to an end? We don't have a faith of easy answers. The provision God gives in this story is not permanent, the boy and the woman will die eventually. But as they live, they are witness to a powerful and living Word of God, from the mouth of a prophet, Elijah, that calls them to trust again and again, even in desperate times.

As we call to mind the loved ones we have lost, we remember their faithfulness, the ups and downs of their lives, the love they gave and the love they lost, the time they spent with us, and the stories they shared. We know their lives were not simple or easy either. They faced war, drought, economic rise and fall, political turmoil, and were

witness to much suffering. But they are the ones who persevered to the last, and were embraced by the Word that came to them, from prophets, preachers, teachers, and the lives of the community of faith. God provided. They were our teachers, but they say that faith isn't taught as much as it is caught, and their faith lives in us.

The words of the prophets, from Nathan to Elijah and Elisha, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Micah, and John all call us to trust in the promises of God. They call us out of ourselves to live for God alone, to know the good things God has done, so that we would be sustained for the future, and carry this living faith into a world in need. We are ones who have been born into the living Word in our baptisms, we have been claimed as part of God's family, and all the saints before us trusted in this same Word of life, Jesus. Jesus - who was faithful for us, all the way to the cross. It was there that Mary's son gave his last breath. He went to the grave, and was raised to life again. He still lives, and He is Lord of all the earth.

The faithfulness of Jesus for us, means that no matter what we face in life, we can trust that the promises of God are always for us, even and especially when we face trials, conflict, pain, and difficulties in the world. It means that our lives are held in the hands of the One who loves us, chooses us, forgives us, and welcomes us into life that extends beyond this world. We belong to Christ here and now, and will inherit the eternal life He brings. That's not to say that what happens here doesn't matter! It matters a lot! We have been gifted with such grace, entrusted with such promises and built up in faith that we would share this good news and welcome others to know this peace that passes all understanding. We carry this living faith with us to our jobs,

schools, celebrations, and gatherings and in all that we get to do. We are living saints too.

So we don't give up hope. We don't go easily down to death, we deny ourselves and live for others, we repent of the ways we have failed to provide for neighbors in need, and we ask the Lord to revive us when we fall short of breath. We speak up for those on the margins, and we will Not be afraid. We have been called and gathered by God, sustained and sent by the Holy Spirit to share the love and life of Jesus with the world. We do it in big ways and small, and that's when miracles happen: we fall in love, babies are born, bodies are healed. We eat together, we hold onto each other, we find healing, warmth, and new life begins again and again.

The rain is coming, church.

Trust in the Lord.

Do not be afraid.

Amen.