

Sermon for Sunday, Nov. 3, 2024
All Saints Sunday

I Kings 17:1-24

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One of the earliest practices of the church was to set aside a day to remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in the faith. This is why today is All Saints Sunday. However hard it might seem to follow the way of Jesus in our own time and place, this is a day to remember that while we may be crazy, we are not alone in our faith, in our trust, in our belief that Jesus rose from the dead. At first glance today's reading doesn't seem to have anything to do with the topic of remembering those that we have loved and lost. But it does have a lot to do with life and it challenges us to consider "how then shall we live even when times are unspeakably difficult?" Today I ask you to consider two ideas.

The first idea has to do with "just in time." God provides for the widow "just in time." I'm thinking that the widow's household has been subsisting on limited means already because the drought has been affecting them for some time. She has undoubtedly been watching her food supplies dwindle. A prudent household manager is going to be paying attention to the flour in the jar and the oil in the jug. She knows that she is at the end of her supply of flour and oil and candidly tells Elijah that she is about to prepare her last meal. After this meal there's no food left and she and her son will starve. So will Elijah.

In our day and age there are many inspirational stories about people and families who had nothing left in the cupboard to eat and unexpectedly a full grocery bag appears on the doorstep or a check arrives in the mail. And it was just enough to keep them going until the next paycheck arrived. But it's always "just in time."

Now I want you to notice something important. Yes, just in time happens. And people of faith see God at work in those situations. But a critical detail is that God acted through people. God saved the widow and her household through Elijah's presence. Elijah's life was saved through the widow's trust in the God of Israel. The stories of groceries on doorsteps or checks arriving in the mail are stories of people that were inspired by God to take action and

provide help. People acted. "How then shall we live even when times are unspeakably difficult?" We are called to act.

The second idea that's striking to me from today's story has to do with the fact that God sent Elijah to a foreign woman, an outsider, someone who never states a belief in YHWH—admittedly we could argue about whether she does so at the very end of the story but she certainly doesn't at the beginning. The important idea is that God was at work in regions far beyond the boundaries of Israel. These would be places where it wouldn't be expected.

Think of it this way: The widow of Zarephath doesn't have the same belief system as Elijah. But Elijah doesn't argue with God about God's choice of who was to be his protector. He doesn't say, "Make my protector someone of the same nationality or political leanings or religious practice as me." Elijah needs help and he trusts that the widow will provide it. But this relationship goes in both directions. She needs help too. They have to help each other and religious belief systems and nationalities and political leanings don't matter to hungry stomachs. It seems to me that we diminish God and God's Spirit when we label someone who has a different belief system as an outsider and isolate ourselves from "those people."

If God was at work in the world inspiring a "foreign woman" then is it possible that God is at work in our world, here and now inspiring people that we label as outsiders? We must not diminish God's capacity to be at work in the world.

Today's Scripture reading is our introduction to Elijah. It is the first mention of him in the Old Testament. But there are other stories about his exploits that come after today's reading. God has tasks for him to accomplish and messages for him to carry to people in power: especially King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. God needs Elijah alive and in today's reading we witness two ways in which God provides for him: first in the wadi Cherith and then in the village of Zarephath. My point is that God was at work and had bigger plans than that which is obvious from today's text.

"How then shall we live even when times are unspeakably difficult?" How does this story apply to us? God has plans for each of us and I'm lifting that concept up before you on a personal and individual level. Now it might not seem like a big thing to extend hospitality to a stranger in the manner that the widow did to Elijah, but let's remember the rest of the work that Elijah was called to accomplish. If God calls you to extend hospitality to someone who

you are certain doesn't believe the same way that you do, I heartily recommend that you trust God in that matter because we all have limited vision. We almost certainly will not be aware of all that God is doing in the world.

"How then shall we live even when times are unspeakably difficult?" We live trusting God and taking action for the good of our neighbor.

One of the biggest challenges that we humans face is that we are constantly trying to box God in, to define what God's work is and isn't. That's a problem because God is at work in ways that are far beyond our imagination. It was demonstrated in the Scripture reading for today. It is also demonstrated by the fact that we celebrate All Saints Sunday. On this day we remember our loved ones who have died. But we also remember that we have this unimaginable promise: the promise of the resurrection. God demonstrated how God was at work through Jesus and it was beyond anyone's imagination. It is still beyond anyone's imagination. But that's okay.

"How then shall we live even when times are unspeakably difficult?" We live clinging to our belief in a God of love, a God of compassion, a God whose ultimate intention is for the salvation and well-being of the entire world, including those like the widow who are just as deserving of God's love and attention as we might claim to be. We live standing secure in God's amazing grace. I invite you to stand as we sing hymn 779, *Amazing Grace*.

I extend these questions to you to encourage you to recognize that the Bible doesn't always answer all of our questions. Here's six questions to consider.

- Why did God send Elijah out of Israel, first to the east beyond the Jordan and then when the wadi dried up back to the west, but outside the boundaries of Israel?
- The widow of Zarephath lived outside of the boundaries of Israel, she is in fact, a native of the same area that Queen Jezebel lived in. Therefore she is probably a worshipper of Ba'al and not a worshipper of YHWH. We surmise that in part because when she talks to Elijah she says, "the Lord *your* God" and not the Lord *my* God or the Lord *our* God. Why did God send Elijah to a foreigner, and non-worshipper of YHWH?
- I'm curious about why God sends Elijah outside of Israel. I think I can explain being sent to the wadi east of the Jordan river. Elijah has angered the king, the most powerful man in Israel and he needs to flee for safety so he goes to a deserted area east of the boundary of Israel. But why to the widow? Surely there were other widows *in Israel* that were in just as much trouble as this one was.
- When he finally meets the widow, how did she know that Elijah was a follower of YHWH? While God tells Elijah that he has commanded a widow to feed him, she never gives any details. She could have said, "A voice spoke to me" or "You must be Elijah the one I've been instructed to feed." But she doesn't.
- This is a powerful story of a prophet, namely Elijah, following God's instructions. One might think that by the end the widow would confess her belief in YHWH. But she actually never does that. The closest she comes is in the last verse when she says, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."
- I'm also curious about the narrative's use of the word "household." "She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days." Is it possible that there were servants connected to the household that were also on the verge of starvation?