

In the Meantime

Third Sunday After Pentecost

June 9, 2013,

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Texts: 1 Kings 17:8-24;
Psalm 146;
Galatians 1:11-24;
Luke 7:11-17

Introduction to the reading from 1 Kings:

We continue reading in the book of 1 Kings today as we will do for several weeks. I want to offer a little context for us as we hear these stories that come to us from this ancient text. For the passage today comes just a few short verses after the prophet Elijah is first introduced. Up until his appearance the book of 1 Kings has chronicled the rise and fall of Israel's kings. Walter Brueggemann is an OT scholar who asserts that the main obligation in telling the story of biblical history is to show how the will and purpose of God will have the final say in the way that power is deployed.¹ Up until now, the kings have operated as if they were the ones who held ultimate power and the arrival of the prophets will challenge that equation. In particular, the kings of Israel have adopted the practices of the kings of the ancient world – hoarding the resources of creation for their use and creating scarcity among the people. The prophets become the counterforce who assert through their acts of power and their prophetic word that God is the one who holds the gifts of creation and those gifts are abundant and sufficient when God's people live according to the Torah and share the fruits of the land.

So hear the word of God as it comes to us from 1 Kings chapter 17.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 149.

Can you imagine living so close to the edge that one cup of flour and a little oil is all that stands between you and starvation? This widow in Zarephath is staring that kind of desperation in the eye, when Elijah comes demanding that she share the very last bit of food she has to make him a meal and give to him a drink. Frankly, I'm surprised she finds the will to even try to offer him hospitality. The famine has been going for many months, there is nothing growing anywhere in sight. All the food is gone. There is literally nothing left for her to give.

I know that kind of desperation exists all over the world and even in some places right here in this country. It's hard to look very long at that kind of suffering. I remembered a presentation this week that I heard a number of years ago by a woman named Alice Mann². I remember her talking about things "too big" to look at. She identified two "near enemies" of compassion. She called them near enemies because they look and feel a little bit like compassion but they actually keep us from being truly compassionate. They keep us from doing anything in the face of suffering that is so devastating. The first of them is pity because it emphasizes the distance between ourselves and the person we pity. The second is overwhelm; the horrified anxiety that can make you depressed so that you find it impossible to reach out. This is what happens to so many of us when we are confronted with the kind of suffering we find in all of these stories.

But it is not what happens to God when confronted with human suffering. The story in Luke makes this so clear. Jesus could have turned away from the funeral procession. That's what many of us would do. We might have moment where we felt some pity for this poor woman but then we'd be on our way. Jesus sustains a compassionate gaze. He sees her in her desperation. Not just her grief but also her fear for her survival now that she is alone in the world. The Greek here is more than just the crying or weeping of grief but the kind of wailing that comes with frantic fear.³ Jesus walks right up to her and makes a promise: your weeping will not last and

² At the time Alice Mann worked for the Alban Institute, a church consulting firm, and she was speaking at a conference for Interim Ministers.

³ I read this exegetical distinction in the course of study on this passage but cannot find the attribution for it!

then he calls the boy to stand and restores him to her. Elijah makes a similar promise: your hunger will not last. Make us some bread and there will be more.

These are inspiring stories about the compassionate love of God in the face of human suffering. Like the book of 1 Kings, the gospel of Luke means to show through this miracle story what God intends for human life. In the face of human hunger, God intends for there to be provision. In the face of human grief, God intends for there to be a restoration of life. We know these promises have been given to us as well. We read through the book of Revelation during Eastertide. Your suffering will not last forever. A day will come when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. We get glimpses but the truth is that we live so much of life in between the promise and the fulfillment. Not everyone has the kind of experience of the widows in our two stories.

Perhaps our real inquiry today should be focused on how we live in the meantime. The nature of biblical stories is that time is often compressed the promise and fulfillment stand right next to each other. Nonetheless in this story of the widow of Zarephath we do get a very brief glimpse into the time between the promise and the fulfillment. This is what interests me in this text. When Elijah first meets the widow she is running around collecting sticks to make a fire, to bake her last loaf of bread. She's actually rather melodramatic when Elijah first approaches her. If this is really her last meal, why bother going through the laborious effort to make a loaf of bread? Talk about something too big to look at: she's staring at her own death and so she gets busy even if it is rather futile; anything to not sit and wait feeling the terror grip her heart.

Have you ever noticed how often we get frantically busy when we are waiting and worried? Not everyone does this. But a lot of us do. Your kids are out way past their curfew. You can't reach them on the cell. You don't know if they are dead on the road or just having a little bit too much fun and all of a sudden it seems like the perfect time to clean out the kitchen cabinets while you wait. I used to see this all the time when I was an interim pastor. Right after the pastor leaves or right before the interim goes there is this flurry of activity, meetings, email, trying to be sure they

cover every angle. I once heard a speaker claim that many church leaders and pastors are functional atheists. They say they trust in the grace and provision of God. They say that it is the power of the Holy Spirit that sustains the work of God's church. But when you look at their calendars and how they spend their time, the truth is that they believe it is all up to them: functional atheists.

Look what happens for the widow when she trusts the promise of God. She makes the bread and then she rests. She doesn't run around until the wee of the hours of the morning baking as much bread as she can fearful that it was a fluke that will only last the day. She makes the bread and she rests...and she trusts that the next time she has to make bread God will provide. And God does. Even in this biblical story where time is compressed we get a glimpse into how she inhabited the in-the-meantime space between promise and provision. She goes to bed trusting but not really knowing that there will be enough for the next day.

There is more going on in this text than this woman's personal piety or this single miraculous event. God's provision is built into the nature of creation. When we say that God provides for all our needs we do not mean that there will be all these miracles that happen every time we are in trouble. God builds the provision into the very nature of creation. And when we build our lives on the promises of God and trust those promises; when we bring those commitments to justice and mercy that we learn about from the Torah and see lived out in Jesus Christ; when we build them into the very structures of our society then when suffering comes there is enough when we share. So the prophet steps in to hold a mirror before the dynasty to call them back to the teachings of the Torah. When the community is closely knit around the promises of God and practices of justice and mercy are built into the way of life then when suffering strikes the most vulnerable (the widows and the orphans) are not left to struggle and suffer alone.

So we hear this Word today: when we trust in the promise and provision of God we have the freedom to give up our frantic work and rest in the grace of God. This is profoundly good news. But it requires incredible trust that God really will provide for us. And it requires us to shape our communal

life around the compassionate mercy of God that we see in both these stories.

I've been learning about this for some time in my own life. Anyone who knows me well knows that I love to plan. Give me a spreadsheet and I am in my glory. I will spin out different scenarios and contingency plans to try to anticipate and be prepared for anything that might come. I can appreciate that about myself. Good planning is a form of good stewardship. I don't mean to say that we should never make plans or ever think in terms of contingencies. But I am learning the difference between the kind of planning that flows from good stewardship and the kind of planning that is fueled by a frantic sense of anxiety.

It's the question of how to live in the meantime before we can know what the future might hold. If we really trust in the promise and provision of God then we have the freedom to step back from all that frantic planning and simply rest in the grace of God. For ourselves...and for others. Trusting the promise of God makes it possible for us to look at things "too big to look at." It allows us to sustain a gaze of compassion that brings us right alongside those who are suffering. Maybe even to become part of their provision.

Or at least to stand and give witness that God is good: that the things that come *to* us and *through* us in the meantime are often so much better than the things we create for ourselves when we get tired of waiting.

As the Psalmist sings today: "Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God!" Amen.