## Fourth Sunday after Epiphany; January 30, 2022 1 Kings 17:7-16 God's Word Persists

After some time the stream dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him: "Get up! Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there. I have commanded a woman there, a widow, to provide for you."

So he got up and went to Zarephath. He came to the city gate, and there he saw a widow gathering sticks. He called to her and said, "Please give me a little water in a jar, so that I can have something to drink."

When she went to get it, he called to her, "Please give me a piece of bread."

She said, "As surely as the LORD your God lives, I have no food except a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a pitcher. See, I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go and prepare it for myself and my son, so that we can eat it and then die."

Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid. Go and do just as you said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and bring it out to me. Then go and make another for you and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says. The jar will not run out and the pitcher of oil will not become empty until the day the LORD sends rain to water the surface of the ground."

So she went and did exactly what Eliah said. He and she, as well as her household, were able to eat for many days. The jar of flour did not run out, and the pitcher of oil did not become empty, just as the LORD had said through Elijah.

Hearing the story of Elijah and the widow is a lot like turning on a movie halfway through. Can you enjoy a movie that you jump into the middle of? Of course. Can you more or less figure out what happened in the first half by watching the second half closely? Sure. But you can't quite fully understand a film unless you take the time to rewind from the middle and go back to the beginning.

And don't worry. We won't go all the way back to the beginning. Not to the Garden of Eden, not even to beginning of Israel, not even to the beginning of Elijah's life. We'll just rewind a bit. The story of Elijah and the widow lands in 1 Kings 17. Let's just rewind one chapter to see what things were like in Israel at that time. When we do, we find a king named Ahab coming to power. We find a reign defined by idolatry, faithless foreign alliances, and child sacrifice. We find a reign summarized this way: **Ahab son of Omri committed more evil in the eyes of the LORD than all those who had gone before him.** And understand: that's a really high standard of evil. The Northern Kingdom of Israel never – never! – had a king who was faithful to the Lord. They were all rotten. But Ahab managed to outdo them all.

The Lord sent his prophet Elijah to wicked Ahab with this message: **"As surely as the LORD lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand, there will be no dew or rain during the coming years, except at my word."** Delivering a message like that to an evil psychopath is dangerous work. So dangerous that, right after Elijah said it, the Lord commanded him to run and hide in a ravine all the way on the other side of the Jordan River.

But lack of rain turned the ravine dry. And here ends the rewind. Now the story we heard earlier, about Elijah and the widow, picks up. And without that little rewind, it would be hard to explain what the Lord

tells Elijah to do now: **"Get up! Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there."** Zarephath lies in Lebanon today. It's not in Israel now and it wasn't in Israel then, either. God is expressly sweeping his own prophet to Israel away from Israel – out of the land of his chosen people – to the home of Gentiles. And thanks to our little rewind, we know why.

Now that we've done a bit of rewinding, would you mind fast-forwarding? It is now about 2,800 years later. We are back inside of Israel, in the region of Galilee, which once lay inside Ahab's kingdom. Another prophet is speaking to Israelites, people from his own hometown. And at the end of that story, he has to escape, too. The people want to throw him off a cliff **[b]ut he passed through the middle of them and went on his way.** What that prophet said upset the people in his hometown so much they wanted him dead, too. He told those people that he was not just a prophet, but the Prophet. He was the promised Messiah, God in the flesh. And they rejected him roundly. So he went on his way. But not before saying this: **"There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon."** 

The people of Israel, led by their King Ahab, had rejected the Word of God spoken through Elijah. And so Elijah left them. He went beyond their borders. And when he did, he saw the Word of God work. He found a starving widow with a starving son. And the first words out of that widow's mouth were, **"As surely as the LORD your God lives..."** The word of the Lord had already crossed the border into Sidon and created faith in this widow's heart. We know she believes in the true God, and not just by these words.

We know it by her actions, too. Because when Elijah, the prophet of God, promises her a miracle, she moves on it. And it's really amazing that she does. Because first Elijah makes what seems like a cruel request. He asks a starving widow and mother to take from her puny supply of flour and oil and make bread for him *first*. Can you imagine the nerve! Elijah doesn't even ask her to go thirds with him and her son. **"But first make a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and bring it out to me."** I believe it is safe to say that if this widow did not have faith in God, she would have used one of those sticks she was gathering and whatever little energy she had left to clock Elijah across his head.

But she does have faith! She believes even the miraculous promise that her flour and oil will not run out until the rain returns and the crops start growing again. So she went and did exactly what Elijah said. He and she, as well as her household, were able to eat for many days. The jar of flour did not run out, and the pitcher of oil did not become empty, just as the LORD had said through Elijah. There are actually two miracles in this story: one, of course, is flour and oil not running out. But the other miracle is this: So she went and did exactly what Elijah said. And, I would argue, that miracle is much more impressive than flour and oil not running out. Flour and oil lasting defies the first law of thermodynamics. That's impressive, for sure. But believing it's going to happen: that's a miracle on a whole other level.

The promises of God were rejected inside Israel's borders. But beyond those borders, in the heart of a Gentile woman, his Word persists and works a miraculous trust in God.

Now let's go forward again, back to Jesus. It wasn't only in Nazareth of Galilee that Jesus' divine words were rejected. It was throughout Israel. And so Jesus' saving message flew beyond Israel's borders and the Word worked faith in Gentile hearts. We see it already during Jesus' ministry: in all four Gospels, we hear only three instances of Jesus commending a person's faith. Do you know what all three of those impressive faiths have in common? They all belonged to Gentiles, people from beyond the land of Israel.

God's Word persists. When it's rejected in one place, it moves and keeps working and keeps creating faith and amazing good works in God's service.

Sometimes this Bible truth gets labeled as racist or antisemitic. That's not fair for two reasons. First, facts are facts. They are incapable of racism or antisemitism. It is a fact that for most of its history most of the people of Israel, all the way up to the time of Christ, rejected their Savior. Second, it's also true that some did believe. Elijah had to run away to Sidon to find faith in God, but later in his life God assured him: there are still thousands in Israel who did believe in the Lord. In his letter to the Romans, we heard St. Paul address the sad fact that so many of his countrymen had rejected the gospel of Christ. But, he also reminds us, some did believe, including Paul himself. And Jesus, of course, called twelve Israelites to start his New Testament Church. Still today there are many Jewish Christians in the world.

So this is not about hating Jewish people or claiming they all reject Christ. But it is to teach us this truth, and let it settle in our hearts: When God's Word is rejected in one place, it moves on. It persists and works faith somewhere else. And for this everyone here can be thankful. Because if God allowed his Word to break down and stall when it meets rejection, it never would bounced beyond Israel's walls. It never would have reached to us here. But God's Word always keeps going. It always keeps working. It persists.

It has persisted all the way to you and me. All the way here, to us, thousands of years after Jesus walked this earth and thousands of miles from his hometown of Nazareth, God's promises have come. And he has worked miracles through his Word. I don't know if you often think of yourself this way, but you are literally miraculous. A message has come to you that is most offensive and devastating to your pride: you're a sinner who deserves nothing but hell from God. But as far as possible from giving you that, God gave you his Son.

His Son came and traveled all through Israel preaching and teaching the good news of heaven, and was mostly rejected. When he was rejected in his hometown, they tried to throw him off a cliff. Do you remember what happened? **[h]e passed through the middle of them and went on his way.** Why? Because he had three more years to go on his mission. Three more years of perfect preaching and teaching, three more years of keeping all of God's commandments perfectly for you. Then he was going to die. Not thrown off a cliff, but lifted up on a tree just as God planned and promised. He sacrificed his holy life to take all your sins away, and picked it up on Easter morning. In his holy life, you are holy. In the death he died, your sins are gone. In his resurrection, you rise to live forever.

Belief in that message requires a miracle. The fact that you believe it – that anyone anywhere believes it – is only because of the power of God's Word. It works. The Spirit uses it to create faith, which is most certainly a miracle. You believe because God's Word persisted all the way to your heart and worked miraculous faith.

That's the good news. But there is a warning in all this for us, too. God's patience is not infinite. When his Word is met with resistance and rejection, he moves it along to work somewhere else. He persists with his Word, but not forever when it's spurned. We see proof in the ministry of Elijah and in the ministry of Christ. We see more proof in the book of Acts; when the apostles met unbelief in one city, it was on to the next. And we see this play out throughout the history of the Christian Church. Parts of the world that were once full of Christian churches are now dominated by mosques. In Western Europe, where the gospel one flourished, many churches have been turned into museums because no one wants to worship there anymore.

What happened? Resistance to God's Word. Resistance that turned into rejection. Rejection that caused God to move along and persist with his Word somewhere else.

Now, many Americans are lamenting that the same thing is happening in this country. And it is. But rather than worrying about the direction an entire nation is heading, it may be wiser to focus on the direction we are heading individually. Lamenting the spiritual decay of a whole country is often used as a deflection so people don't have to examine their own lives personally.

So, here's a story that's definitely not about me, so don't get that impression. One night not along ago, a friend of mine got home after a long day. My friend just got done teaching and writing and his brain was tired. Then this friend who's definitely not me saw his new copy of the Luther devotional, "Day by Day We Magnify Thee," on the corner of his coffee table. Nice people in his church that's definitely not Trinity bought it for him for Christmas. He had not yet taken the time that day to personally meditate on God's Word. But also there was a Capitals-Jets game on TV, and he was tired. So he said to himself, "First a little hockey, then the devotion." But the game got good. Ovechkin scored. It went to overtime. The devotion was never read.

Just out of curiosity, I returned to that devotional while writing this sermon. I wondered, "What would I have read that night, had I not resisted the Word of God in favor of hockey?" Here is what I would have read (the translation is a bit old-fashioned; please forgive that:

Based on Titus 3:4, which says, **But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared.** And the devotion says:

Thus God has shown himself in His Gospel altogether loving and kind toward us, willing to receive every man, despising none, forgiving all our wickedness, never driving any away with sincerity. His Gospel proclaims pure grace, with which he succors and surrounds us in the most benevolent way, so that no man is treated according to his merit and deserts. This is the time of grace, where every man may draw nigh to the throne of God with complete trust and confidence.

In the Gospel God has revealed to us His kindness not only that He will help men and suffer them to be near Him, but yet more holds on to them, seeks to be with them, and offers them unceasingly his grace and friendship. These are two sweet and comfortable words and promises of our God, namely, that He offers His grace to us and does not leave us, and that He receives in a most loving way all who desire to draw near to Him. What more could He do? Behold then, why His Gospel is called a comfortable and lovely message of God in Christ. What sweeter word could be spoken to a wretched, sinful conscience. – from Sermons of the year 1522.

This is the greatest reason to listen to what God says. Because, in Luther's words, "no sweeter word could be spoken" to us. He loves us and saves us in his Son.

When the widow of Zarephath listened to God's Word, she got life. She got flour and oil that didn't run out: life for her, her son, and Elijah during a drought. But she got more life than that. By faith in the Lord, she got life eternal. When we listen to what the Lord says to us, we get life, too. Why should I try to improve on Luther? He wrote his sermon 500 years ago and it hasn't been topped since: *His Gospel proclaims pure grace, with which he succors and surrounds us in the most benevolent way, so that no man is treated according to his merit and deserts.* 

True enough: there is a warning from God on this Sunday. Resistance to his Word is dangerous. It leads, eventually, to rejection. And God does not suffer that treatment of his Word forever. He persists with his truth by taking to another place. We are right to take that warning to heart. But warnings and threats from God will never move us. Only his loving gospel will. And his Word is where we find it.

This is why listen eagerly, receive it happily, and believe it: for the gift of life in Jesus, for life eternal. Amen.