

Rev. George Miller
November 3, 2024
1 Kings 17:8-16

Today's reading is such a special one. It's my favorite story in the Bible; one that got me through the toughest of times when I was in my twenties, working 3 jobs, just trying to make ends meet.

It's a story about God, about miracles, about faith in action.

It's about facing scarcity and adversity head on, and moving forward even when the odds say "No."

Today's story takes place 90 years after the Temple was completed, and things have not gone well for God's people.

The nation is divided, the north has split off from the south and there is a new king who builds an altar for another god named Baal and no longer worships the Lord.

From out of seemingly nowhere, a prophet named Elijah steps into the story and tells the king that as a consequence of his actions, no rain will fall upon the land for years.

That's where today's scripture begins. In this time of drought and emptiness, God says to Elijah- "Go!"

Gods tells Elijah "Go to the land North of Tyre. A widow is there who will feed you."

Elijah gets to the gates of the city, and he sees a woman gathering sticks. He asks for water and a morsel of bread.

But the widow replies "I have nothing. Just a handful of flour; a bit of oil. I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go home, make bread, so my son and I can eat it and die."

There is so much going on right here. The extreme scarcity and sheer loneliness.

This woman is so vulnerable. She is a widow, which means she has already lost so much and experienced great pain.

She is a mother, which means who must not only fend for herself, but her child.

The place where Elijah meets her has great significance. She is at the city gates, which means she is at the very end of town.

This is not the Townsquare, surrounded by others. Nor the Temple with other worshippers, or the dining room table, with friends.

She had to travel a distance just to find something, anything to cook with and keep on living.

And what she finds is not much- just a couple of sticks. Two. Barely enough to make a fire.

This story has so much heaviness, so much scarcity.

But as we witness again and again throughout scripture,
where there can seem to be moments of assured failure,

there can also be the moments where life and God and wonder appear and exist and surprise us
once more.

Like Hagar in the wilderness, like Sarah and Hannah with their barrenness, this is a woman who
is without, who seems to have come to the end of her story.

She is so astute, so aware of the gravity of the situation.

Into this moment comes a stranger, a man, someone who could possibly do great harm.

And what does the prophet Elijah say to her?

The same words that God said to Hagar in Genesis 21.

The same words that Moses tells the people right before the waters of the Red Sea part.

“Do not be afraid.”

In the middle of this women’s misery, the Prophet says “Do not be afraid.”

This phrase right here is such a foundational phrase of scripture, from the Old Testament to the
New.

“Do not be afraid,” Elijah says to the woman.

In others he tells her “Be Brave.”

Sometimes those are the only words you can say to someone who is going through something
really, really difficult.

“Be brave,” Elijah says. “Make your bread. Bring some to me, to your son, to yourself. For
your jar of meal and your jug of oil will not run out until the rains fall again.”

The woman does as encouraged, and somehow, some way she and her son are able to eat for
days without the jar becoming empty or the oil running dry.

It is a miracle of amazing proportions. One that we can hear and say “How is this possible?
How can this be?”

There are many ways we can interpret this, and things that can be said about how and why the jars did not run out.

But here is one thing we can focus on today- the actions of this amazing woman.

She is living during a time of historical crises- a drought has ravaged the land and food is nearly impossible to find.

She has lost her husband, making her one of the most vulnerable people in the city, with no one to lean upon or care for her.

She is not just doing this alone, but she has a child to care for and worry about.

And she has so so so little-

only has a handful of meal, a little of oil, and a couple of sticks that she had to search hard for.

She is running on absolute empty.

And yet, when she is told to “Not be afraid,” but to feed Elijah, that is what she chooses to do.

She could have said “No.” She could have completely refused.

But instead she decided to take actions. She acts. She does.

She responds, and in doing so she plays a huge part in her own salvation.

When studying verses 13, we hear a multitude of verbs that she is instructed to do-

Do not be afraid.

Do as you have said.

Make a little cake.

Bring it to me.

Make something for yourself and son.

Verse 15 tells us “She went and did...and her house ate for many days.”

This widow, this woman, is so incredibly brave, so incredibly bold because she could have said “No,” she could have stopped, she could have given up.

But instead she heard; and she acted.

Just like Hagar in the wilderness in Genesis 21 who could have remained a victim in the wilderness, but instead did as God instructed and was led to what she needed.

Just as Moses and the Israelites.

Sure, God parted the waters, but the people had to be willing to step, they had to be willing to take that chance, they had to be brave and bold enough to walk between those waters.

The widow in today's story is such a wonderful hero because she represents all of us, man or woman, young or old,

Who here or watching from home knows what it is like to have struggled, what it is like to have experienced a great loss?

What it is like to feel like an outsider, what it is like to worry about a child or family, what it is like to live during historically difficult times and wonder-

"How am I going to make it through to the other side?"

And the way this woman does this is by hearing a Word from God, not allowing fear to have the ultimate grip on her, and to act, to do, to move.

If we have lived long enough, we have all experienced our own kinds of drought and emptiness.

It can be financial issues, work related, relationships, marriage, chronic illness, death.

Things that seem to say "You're done," "You're finished," and "You're as good as dead."

But the faith of God's people, the faith we have in God, is one that says "With the Lord, we can find a way."

"With the Lord we can survive."

"With God what may seem to be an ending can be a new beginning."

The Good News we find in today's story and throughout the Bible is that God has a way of offering us life even in the midst of uncertainty,

even in the midst of death, even when it seems we have nothing left.

We are brave. We believe. We act, trusting in the Lord.

For that, let us say "Amen."