

Second Sunday After Pentecost  
June 10, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: 1 Kings 17:8-24, Psalm 30, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17*

The story from our Old Testament reading today is one of those stories that quickly captures the imagination. I don't know about you, but as the text was being read I could see in my mind's eye this prophet Elijah coming up on the edge of the village Zarephath, meeting the poor widow, and how God provided for the three of them throughout the days of the drought in the land.

Actually, it helps to back up a little bit. What we know about Elijah coming into this story is that he has confronted King Ahab, a king who is doing evil in God's sight. Elijah has just gone and pronounced God's judgment that there will be a drought in the land because Ahab has been worshipping the false god, Baal, the original god of prosperity. Needless to say, Elijah wasn't too welcome in the land after that so God sent him first to a wadi, a dried-up creek bed, until there was no food or water there any longer. That's when God sent him to this village, where God had commanded a widow to care for him.

We know only a couple of things in general about this widow. First of all, that she was poor. Which was usually the case with widows. She had a son, which meant that if her husband had property before he died, she would have been able to keep it since it would have passed to her son instead of going to her husband's brothers. But, having a son also meant she had the responsibility of raising and providing for a growing child. Parents are known to do some pretty extreme things when it comes to providing for their children. And with the drought in the land, food was getting pretty scarce. This mother was probably at her wits end as to how to provide for her son. In fact, we get the idea that she was giving up. That's when Elijah shows up.

He asks for a drink of water, which is bad enough since there is a drought. And then he has the nerve to say, "Give me a morsel of bread." Now, in the text, her response sounds pretty calm, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in the jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Actually, that first bit, "As the Lord your God lives" is a cuss word. So it more like, "What is the bleep, bleep, bleep, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal..." and out pours her whole situation, full of fear and despair, and probably no small portion of anger at her helplessness to provide for her child.

It's not that hard to identify with her situation. Life is full of such times, when there doesn't look to be any good answers. We can't see the way out of where we are. We may be tempted to eat the last bit of meal, and give up and die. That's when we need most to remember this widow, this story, this case of God showing up in our lives. It's not over, till it's over.

In the widow's case, Elijah tells her not to worry, that God promises that the jar of meal will not empty and the jug of oil will not fail until rain comes again to water the earth. So, go ahead and make a little cake for him, and for herself and her son. To her credit, she did go and make him a little cake. And the meal and oil didn't run out. For many days.

The text earlier said that God had commanded the widow to help Elijah. It doesn't tell us anywhere that God said anything to the widow. I often imagine her going off to do that, that first day, muttering under her breath, "Yeah, right!!!!" And as she was kneading the little bit of bread and coaxing up a fire thinking to herself "Why am I doing this? This makes no sense." But she did it, not knowing what would come next.

And then I can imagine her the next day, shaking the jar of meal that she was certain would be empty, only to find enough again, for another days bread. This time with surprise, incredulity. Maybe even gasping aloud, "How can this be??" And the next day, or the next week, shaking her head and thinking to herself, "What is going on here? Until slowly by slowly her despair is turned to tentative hopefulness, and bewildered joy. In a word, faith. Faith that this God of the prophet Elijah, was a God to be trusted, at least with enough for today.

Names of people and places are usually important in Old Testament stories so I went to look up the word Zarapheth, to see what it meant in Hebrew. It actually means, "the place where refining is done" Something like a crucible. It's related to a word for goldsmith. Zarapheth is that place where faith is refined, purified. Turned from despair, or distain, to faith, and hopefulness, maybe even bewildered joy.

I have come to believe that people of faith aren't born that way. We all go through our own Zarapheth stories. Faith is a process, it is something that starts out small, with a act of trust in God's promise. It might even be just a cynical, "Oh what the heck, what difference will it make" like the widow's act of baking a little cake for Elijah,. But that's often all it takes, for God to get started on us, showing us what it possible..

Faith is a process that sometimes takes a while. Great faith, deep faith, doesn't happen overnight. The widow and her son were fed for many days. It is, in fact, a process that lasts a lifetime. All that really changes is that it gets easier and easier to take that first little step, that little leap of faith, because you've seen it before what God can do. Even when you can't see how it might be done, God makes a way out of no way.

The third thing to remember is that this is a process that never quits, but rather becomes a way of life. Even the widow, after having gone to faith school for many days, is still met with the tragedy of her son. God used that too, to grow her faith, to refine it, purify and strengthen it.

The same is true for us. Life will happen. There will be days when we can't see a way forward. Tragedy will befall us. Despair may come to our doorstep. That's when we remember this story, when we remember maybe our own stories, and all the things that God has already done. That's the ground we walk on, to take the next step, to let God refine, and purify and strengthen our own faith.

And that's when we come to be like the psalmist, with our own stories to tell, of how God touched our lives, how God made a way out of no way, how God changed our despair into joy. We are the ones with nothing left to do but praise the One who fills the jar with what we need for today. We are the ones who live lives of hopefulness, and bewildered joy. Amen