

[NL sermon Elijah and Widow]

BIBLE WOMEN: WIDOW
JUNE 23-24, 2018

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL
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I Kings 17:1-16
The Heart of God

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Please join me in prayer: *Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Give us this day our daily bread...

One day, after Jesus has been off praying by himself, his disciples say, *Lord, teach us how to pray* (Luke 11:1). In response, the Lord offers to them – and to us! – not a STUDY GUIDE, not a MANUAL, not an INSTRUCTION BOOKLET...but a prayer...one that is simple, sincere, sufficient, and succinct.

In just a few short phrases, Jesus teaches us to pray:

- that we might honor God
- that we might seek the Lord's will
- And that we might always ask God to provide us with:
 - our daily bread
 - forgiven-and-forgiving hearts
 - and protection from temptation and evil

Martin Luther was right to assert that each little phrase in Jesus' prayer is packed full of meaning, a perfect example of which is the ordinary phrase: *daily bread...*

In fact, Luther also tells us exactly what *daily bread* includes. I know that many of you had to memorize this from the Small Catechism.

Help me out here – daily bread includes:

- food and clothing,
- work and income,
- an orderly community,
- favorable weather,
- a good name,
- home and property,
- a devoted family,
- good government,
- peace and health,
- and true friends and neighbors

(Explanation to the 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Give us this day our daily bread...

What an appropriate petition for our world today – especially for people in places that are economically-challenged, storm-ravaged, drought-stricken, war-torn, or politically-charged. *Give us this day our daily bread...indeed!* And along with it, quilts and shoes and socks... security and family and food...

In this way our *daily bread* is **also** a most appropriate petition... for the **widow** in today's **bible** story. Put yourself in her place.



Imagine that you are alone...with your child –
 in a land that is devastated by drought...
 You peer into your jar of flour and see...a handful...
 You look into your jug of oil and see...a thimble-full...
 And you realize...that after this final meagre meal, never again will
 there be any more *daily bread*...literally!

This strong, sad, pragmatic woman goes out to gather a few sticks, to
 build a small fire, to prepare the *last supper* of her life, the *last supper*
 of her **child's** life...

Describe what that woman is feeling – what WE would be feeling?

-Despair, hopelessness, grief, anger, resignation, regrets...

Give us this day our daily bread...

On the one hand, this is a simple story, a bare-bones slice of life at its most basic level: it's about how God intervenes in the life of a foreign woman and her son, and by doing so claims them as his own. We don't know the name of the woman – or her son – nor do we ever hear from them again – although we do hear ***about*** them on one amazing occasion, but we'll put that on the back burner for a minute.

On the other hand, this is anything **but** a simple story...it is, in fact, **filled** with some incredible contrasts:

Scarcity vs. abundance	Holy Man vs. foreign woman/son
Fear of death vs. life preserved	Real death vs. restored life
Foreign god vs. the one true God	Following God's will, not our own

Our story starts with the introduction of the great prophet, Elijah. This is his grand entrance to the biblical drama and he comes out swinging a big bat. He is so frustrated with the cruelty, the hypocrisy and the faithlessness of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that he summons a famine across the land...



What's fascinating about this opening verse is that Elijah seems to be acting by his **own will** rather than by God's command. Look at verse 1 again:

v. 1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As *the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, **except by my word.***'

Excuse me... Except by **WHOSE** word???

That kinda sounds like Elijah is letting his anger cloud his judgement, that he's leaving behind his role as PROPHET and climbing up a few rungs to claim the very power of God!

Now look at verse 2: *The word of the Lord came to him, saying...* In fact, those are the words that will be used every other time God enters this story: *The word of the Lord came to him, saying...* But they were not said in verse 1. It makes me wonder if God feels the need to teach Elijah about who is God and who is not, especially when we see what happens next.

First, Elijah is sent by the Lord into the wilderness where he'll have to drink from a puddle and eat food that's brought to him by ravens... **Now exactly what kind of food would ravens have to share???** In other words: Elijah's diet will be muddy water, moldy bread and road kill!! Mm, mm, good!

Then, when even **that** water source dries up because of the famine caused by Elijah, we're told that *The word of the Lord came to him, saying go now to Zarephath, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.*

From his up close and personal experience of the famine out in the desert, Elijah now will come face to face with other people who are suffering. And, though a famine might at worst inconvenience the king and queen, it's nothing compared to the widespread suffering among it brings to the poor.

Enter...the widow...of Zarephath!

Now, right away the question has to be asked: Why would God send Elijah to be cared for at the home of a POOR widow? Wouldn't things have gone a little easier if he'd been sent to the home of a WEALTHY widow?

So let's brainstorm for a minute. **Give me some reasons why God should NOT have picked this widow to care for Elijah...**

1. She's NOT Jewish
2. She's poor.
3. She doesn't have any food.
4. She's ready to give up on life – there's no hope for her or her son.
5. Anything else???

Now let's imagine why God DID pick her...

1. She's NOT Jewish
2. She's poor.
3. She doesn't have any food.
4. She's ready to give up on life – there's no hope for her or her son. In short:
5. She embodies the essence of what it means to be the last, the lost, the least and the lowly...
6. And I see in her a strength of character. From her response to Elijah's request for food and water, to her heart-broken cry at the death of her son, this woman is a perfect example of the type of person that God loves to use as a vehicle for grace.

The Book Thief is a best-selling novel by the author Marcus Zusak...raise your hand if you've read it... The story is narrated by the Angel of Death who turns out to be anything BUT evil. The job of this entity is not to CAUSE people to die... It simply collects the spirits of people when they die, and ushers them on – hopefully to heaven.

Death tells the story of “The Book Thief,” a little girl in Nazi Germany who has been orphaned. Events transpire and she is ultimately sent to live with a husband and wife, who take her into their home.

It's wartime, so everything is rationed. Add to that challenge the fact that her adoptive parents have refused to join the Nazi party. As a result, there is never enough work, which means that there's never extra food...and almost always, not enough. As time goes on, things get worse.

And yet, they also get better in an inside-out, upside-down strange, scary and loving sort of way. A friend of a friend shows up at their door one day and asks for shelter.

1. He is Jewish.
2. He needs food.
3. He needs a place to stay.
4. He is being hunted the “King” – der Fuhrer
5. And ultimately, in the same way that it worked out for the Widow of Zarephath, her son, and Elijah, so it does in this story: they all prove to be a blessing to each other.

There’s no magical jar of flour or jug of oil that continues to give them life... But there is the blessing of a relationship, a coming together of frightened hearts and wounded spirits. And though Death is ever present, they all manage to emerge from their suffering more complete than they’d ever had the right to dream.

If you decide to read the book, I’d recommend you keep a big box of Kleenex close by – it will make you cry!

In this same vein, there are a number of blessings that arise out of this amazing interaction between the widow, her child and Elijah.

1. The woman and child are able to provide Elijah with his need for *daily bread*.
2. He is able to bless them with God’s recurring miracle of grain and oil...for their daily bread...
3. They’re all blessed to see God’s big miracle of restoring the dead boy to life.
4. They become kind of a *family* through their shared experience.
5. This woman and her son (two people who are insignificant in the eyes of those who rule countries as kings and queens) these two lost **FOREIGNERS**, have been found, and they’ve been brought home into the family of faith. In fact...



6. this woman and her son are centrally featured in the very first sermon that Jesus preaches. The first proclamation of the Son of God to the world...and he includes this unnamed woman and her son in his message...

Recap Luke 4:14-22

So Jesus returns to his home town and, in his home congregation – or synagogue – is invited to preach. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah, saying:

¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?””

But then he keeps talking and things go south in a hurry!

²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon...

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Sitting in his home church, surrounded by his home-town folks, Jesus offers them – and us! – a glimpse into the very heart of the Almighty whom he serves unconditionally. In a very real sense, he tells them that God has a passion for seeking out those people whom the world dismisses, abuses or ignores.

Where birthrights and religions have always claimed the power to control who will be invited into heaven and who will be sent to hell, Jesus basically tells them: *that’s not the way God wants it to work*. And then he showcases this foreign widow as an example of God’s grace in action.

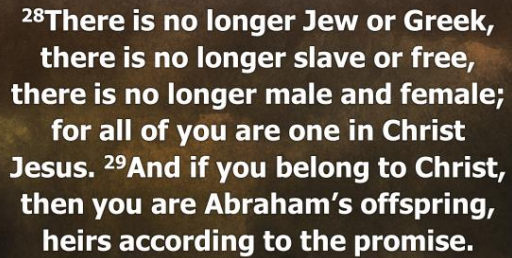
Her sacrificial act of obedience to the God who provides, inspires the very Son of God in his sacrificial act of obedience to save the world.

Think of how Jesus went about living this very creed. How many times and in how many places did he: befriend those who were considered enemies, eat with tax collectors and prostitutes, and break all sorts of laws to help people who were in need?

It’s an open-armed passion that carries him through to the very end. Remember how even as he is dying, he prays, ***Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing!***

And as God honors that prayer and takes away the sin of the world or the sake of Jesus' sacrifice, we get not just a glimpse of God's heart, but front row seats into the IMAX version of God's loving grace.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Galatians 3:28-29. Let's read it together...



²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ
Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ,
then you are Abraham's offspring,
heirs according to the promise.

That's how this woman and her child – those foreigners!!! – were brought into the family of faith... It's news that should warm **our** hearts, feed **our** souls and lift **our** spirits...because we who were **also** once foreigners to the faith have **also** been welcomed into the heart of God...by virtue of God's love, God's passion, and God's grace...through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.