

Cameron Barr

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See, Listen, Go, Bless

1 Kings 17: 8-16 | Luke 4

Have you ever heard the phrase - they “didn’t have two sticks to rub together”? I don’t know for sure, but that phrase might have first described the poverty of the Widow of Zarephath. When I read scripture, I’m so focused on the themes and the narrative. I’m trained to ask - What’s this story say about God? What judgment is the prophet uttering against what king? How are we to understand the narrative, the location, the symbols? And in this story the theological aims are fairly straightforward. The Prophet Elijah has delivered a devastating oracle against Israel’s greedy and faithless King Ahab, predicting a horrible drought as a sign of God’s displeasure with Ahab’s rule. No doubt fearing retaliation from the throne, Elijah flees to the countryside beyond the reach of Ahab’s court, where God has promised the prophet will find enough water to survive. But soon even the streams in Elijah’s safehaven are dry to the bone, so the prophet keeps wandering into more distant territories where the name of Israel’s God is unknown.

Way out there in Zarephath of Sidon Elijah meets a woman and child. As individuals, they are incidental to the grander themes of the text. Their humanity would be easily lost in textual analysis. They are useful to this text in the first place because they are so marginal to the experience of God’s people. They are not Israelites. They are away from the center of the story’s main events. They are a portrait of desperation and poverty. When I say they didn’t have two sticks to rub together it’s because we meet them as they are gathering sticks for a fire. She has

nothing. She has a bit of oil in a jug. She's down to her final portion of meal for making bread. And she has given up hope of finding more food and surviving the drought. "I am now gathering a couple of sticks," she says, "so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Whoah. I had to read that sentence twice. It is one of the most heartbreaking and desolating lines I have found in scripture. Forget the geopolitics of Israel and Judah. Who cares about the feud between Ahab and Elijah. Even the power struggle between Yahweh and the little idols of Canaan are meaningless now. These are the words of a woman and her child.

This is one of those Bible stories in which the grace of God multiplies the food. In the first miracle attributed to the prophet Elijah, she takes the material she has on hand - meal and oil, maybe a bit of water in a vessel - and forms it into a cake. Elijah proclaims that her jar of flour and her jug of oil will remain full until the rains come again. This sign is meant to show the power and the mystery of Israel's God because none of the other gods in the region have been able to save anyone from the drought. I can only presume that Jesus was particularly struck by the story of this woman and child because he remembers it plainly and quotes it in his first major address. Preaching to his home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus reminds the congregation of the great famine and the miracle that saved this most distant and foreign widow. Some scholars think of Jesus's words here as his personal mission statement. Reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says that God has anointed him with a special commission "to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

We could have a pretty involved Bible study about these texts. There is much to consider about Ahab and Elijah, about Yahweh and the Canaanite deity Baal, about the significance of drought and famine in the ancient world. But

perhaps it is just enough to remember the humanity of the people portrayed in scripture. They do not have to be significant people to be remembered in the text. That they are mentioned at all is a sign that they are remembered in the story of God's faithfulness. Even more so for this humble woman and her child. The miracle of food and water is a sign of God's presence in their lives. If anyone might be left out of the story of God's faithfulness it would be them: way out on the margins of existence, in a place that no one had ever heard of and where no one had ever heard the name of God.

There is a piece of wisdom I have heard attributed to Jill and Rick Edens. I don't know how true it is but it seems consistent with what I know of them. It's said that if there was a death or a sickness or a need, the philosophy of the Edens was to just go. No need to call and ask, or to fuss too much over scheduling, or to worry if you might be welcome or not. If there is a need, don't be held back by your anxieties - Just Go. How else will they know that you care? Your presence will be a blessing.

Jesus is the sign of God's recognition of humanity in all of creation and God's movement all who dwell along these margins. To far flung Zarephath, or to prisoners in captivity, to those who are poor or in poverty, to those oppressed by the structures of evil - Jesus says that his purpose is to go there. His presence at the margins is a blessing of humanity at the margins. His purpose is the commission in which we all share.

I have been thinking a fair bit about how we care for those around us who have needs for housing and for food. That is partly because I see so much need in our community through the IFC, and I'm aware of how Covid-19 has made it more difficult to get a room or a bed in a shelter. There have been some very cold nights this winter, when those who need rooms were not able to find any. And so since we are neighbors with the IFC, there have been more and more conversations among

us about how to meet the needs of housing and food in our community. More often than not I am humbled by how few resources we have at our disposal to make a meaningful difference for those most vulnerable around us. Frequently my own efforts to get involved or offer a solution only complicates matters. But it seems somehow holy and important to me that we recognize the humanity of all who pass through our building, or walk through our parking lot, or camp in our woods.

It may be that too much concern with the text, its history or methods of analysis, is to miss the point of God's story entirely. In a similar manner it's sometimes true that our preoccupation with finding the right solutions to someone else's problems only takes away from the experience of honoring their humanity. Aside from Ahab and Elijah and the drama that drives the narrative forward, we have a woman and child and the presence of God revealed in the particularity of their existence. It may be that Jesus tells their story because it is sacred simply to see them, to acknowledge their place in God's covenant, and to witness God's presence in their lives.

So let us not become preoccupied with analysis and understanding, or with resolving and fixing. To follow in the way of Jesus is to undertake a simpler and more manageable commission. Our work is to see the humanity of others. To listen to the voices that are unheard. To go to the margins of our circle. To bless the sacred stories that we uncover.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. To see. To listen. To go. To bless.

Amen.