

Augusta First Baptist Church  
1 Kings 17:1-14  
Good News in Hard Times  
June 3, 2007

*NRS 1 Kings 17:1 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." 2 The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 3 "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." 5 So he went and did according to the word of the LORD; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. 7 But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." 13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."*

Elijah is one of my favorite prophets, which is why I have included him as part of this series, "Dead Men Talking," which focuses on the prophets of the Old Testament. Technically speaking, Elijah is not a dead man. In 2 Kings, we read that he ascended into heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Of course, having a favorite prophet is not saying much, because a Biblical prophet was not usually someone you could cozy up to. Elijah is no exception. He was at times a fierce loner, living outside society in the wilderness, and being fed by ravens. He dwelt outside the status quo and the systems of power and beyond the predictable categories. In fact, King Ahab called him, "Troubler of Israel," because Elijah condemned Israel's diluted faith structure that had come to depend on the pagan gods known as Baal.

Still, Elijah remains a favorite of many. Even today, Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will come only after Elijah's announcement. Elijah is important to the Jewish faith in other ways. Several years ago Amy and I were invited to celebrate Passover in the home of one of our Jewish friends. According to tradition, a door is left open for Elijah to enter, and a place at the table is also set for him. Elijah's name means "YHWH is God" (that is, the LORD is God) which foreshadowed Elijah's life of singular devotion to God.

Keep your Bibles open as we move through 1 Kings, to listen to the Dead Man of Elijah speak to us today. We first learn about Elijah in chapter 17 of 1 Kings, where he pronounces a drought over all the land. Droughts are never good. We complain about this current drought because our lawns are not green and our perennials are struggling to survive. For our farmers, droughts can crush their livelihood. In Elijah's day, a drought very often meant death.

It wasn't just the land that was suffering drought. The people too, were going through a spiritual drought. Their hearts had become dry and barren places, that no longer allowed the presence of God to enter and nourish. A drought was widely understood as a divine curse against not only the land, but the people. Elijah's prophecy is problematic on several fronts. You see, Baal is a rainmaker, and Elijah is saying the rain is going to stop, but not because of Baal withholding his hand, but because of YHWH's displeasure.

After pronouncing a drought on the land he travels east, far away from his home and eventually meets up with a widow who is rummaging for sticks. In my mind's eye I see this stooped and gaunt woman, who looks much older than her actual years. Her leathery hands are scavenging for twigs and branches for a meager fire that will cook, we soon learn, a last meal for her son and herself. She embodies, as one scholar phrases it, "a cipher for the powerless, uncredentialed, disadvantaged, and hopeless" (Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, p. 210)

Hospitality, however, was penultimate in the ancient culture of the near and middle east. So, when Elijah asks for water and food from this stranger, we should not be too surprised. When she tells him that she and her son are destitute, he nonetheless presses her to reach beyond her scarcity, and trust in God's provision. True to his word, the woman's oil and meal never ran out.

As I said, there are two droughts going on during Elijah's prophetic ministry: one is the obvious drought that Israel and the rest of the region were facing. Three and a half years is a long time, even in the Middle East, to go without rain. The second drought is a drought of beliefs. Israel's King, Ahab, has been described earlier in *1 Kings* as one of the most evil in the sight of God. It is a dry time for the people of God.

When we are introduced to this widow and son, they have, quite frankly, given up. The drought has exacted its toll on this meager family. In the book, What is the What a Sudanese, reflects on his childhood marked by atrocious bloodshed still going on even today in Sudan. He and hundreds of other boys walked hundreds of miles through southern Sudan to refuge in Ethiopia. Throughout the journey they faced disease, starvation, attacks from rebels, and attacks from the government. Daily they were terrified by wild animals looming in the bush, and many times throughout their harrowing trek, a lion or two would pounce upon the children, dragging one away to be eaten. He said, sometimes it would be too much for the children. And they would just give up. First, a child would just stop talking. Soon, they would sit down, never to walk again, or crawl over to a tree, and wait for some wild animal to take them away, or just lie down and sleep, and never wake up.

The widow and the son have given up. The drought has become too much. We go through our own droughts as well. Some of you today may feel the parch and pinch of dry hunger and thirst—feelings of depression, spiritual abandonment, poverty of soul and heart, and loneliness. There are times, I suggest in all of our lives, where our pantry is lacking. We have dipped so long in our own personal resources, but are now coming up wanting. It happens in so many ways. There is the forty-something man – of course, I need to be careful here – who in spite of achievement, accomplishments, and success they feel dry and empty. It happens in marriages. I read a statistic that after thirty years of marriage the likelihood of a divorce increase sixteen percent. And don't think your marriage is full-proof in church. According to Barna Research, Baptists have the highest divorce rate among all denominations. Even good people in First Baptist go through droughts.

Droughts are not just meteorological events. They are social, emotional and spiritual occasions of crisis. It is when our lives are void of richness and variety that we become like old, abandoned wells that offer nothing, except maybe a small jar of this and a little jug of that.

We read in our story, that the widow's needs, and that of her son, and Elijah's, were met. The drought, however, was not at this time taken away. It was still there, and this detail is important, because droughts come and go. What remains, is that, in God and God alone, we find abiding sustenance.

As one reads through *Elijah*, we read of a man who had an up and down life. Eventually, he leaves this widow and her son, and soon the rains return. Yet there are more challenges Elijah must face. There is a showdown between Ahab and the fertility gods of Baal, and Elijah, and the LORD God. It was an ancient Biblical version of a shootout: four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal against solitary Elijah. Hand's down the

LORD God comes out as the clear “winner,” but immediately, Elijah flees for his life, hides in a cave, and waits to die. It is another symbolic drought for this man, whose name means, “The LORD is my God.”

I have two concluding thoughts about this dead man talking: It Takes Fidelity to Face the Drought. It is tempting amidst a drought, to look for other alternatives, to satiate our hunger with junk substitutes. Elijah embodies the biblical notion, that a prophet is not so much a foreteller, as he is a forth-teller. John Claypool writes: “Prophecy is not so much the ability to see into the future, as it is the power to see deeply into present reality” (Glad Reunion, p. 115). What Elijah “saw” was that Israel, particularly under Ahab’s rule, had divided loyalties. They served God, but alongside a host of other conditions and allegiances.

There on Mt. Carmel, in the eighteenth chapter amidst the great showdown Elijah says, “If the LORD is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him” (v.21) – no compromises, no capitulations, and no contradictions – just choose.

Of course, we don’t have to worry about Baal gods anymore, but let’s not delude ourselves into thinking that we no longer struggle against competing alliances. Baal gods were fertility gods. They promised rain for crops, abundance for the harvest, and prosperity for the faithful. Security and comfort were in a way the gods of Baal.

Security and comfort – who among us is not tempted at those alters? We want it all to be well, to be protected and cared for, and cocooned from the hardships of the rest. That is why we work and save and plan our retirements and go on nice vacations. We pray for security and comfort for those we love, and for those we care for – I do, and I am sure you do, too. But security and comfort are false gods. The LORD God called his children then and now. We exist to be and become. There is a beautiful line in chapter 19, as Elijah is out hiding in the cave. God speaks to Elijah and says: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v.9). In fact, God asks him twice.

There comes a time in every life, where we have to make a choice. We cannot straddle the fence or “limp” as Elijah phrases it in 18:21, “between two different opinions.” There comes a time in every life where we have to make choice and decide who or what we are going to follow. Will we choose security or courage, will we choose comfort, or what is right? Will we choose abundance, or trust amidst scarcity?

The second concluding observation I have is: It Takes Courage to Face the Drought. Elijah begins living out his pronouncement of drought in the wild, fed by the ravens, and beyond the reach of the power structure. Walter Brueggemann writes, that we “follow this figure who lives completely outside royal categories” (1 & 2 Kings, p. 209). In Elijah, we see a prophet who was not trying to figure out life’s riddles or expound upon wisdom’s platitudes. Before the drought, he lived in the wild, and during the drought he lived amidst a widow’s poverty and after the drought he dwelt in the lonely cave of isolation. We cannot overlook the courage it takes to face the drought.

Courage is a good word for our days as well. The truth is, throughout our life, we will meet up against obstacles, challenges, droughts and so forth. We do not exist in a vacuum. Families, careers, and even our very faith, will meet up against the harsh forces of diminishment.

Furthermore our fear of scarcity governs many of our lives. Our consumer economy whispers we do not own enough, have enough, or otherwise, are not good enough. The fear of “not enough”, is the same fear that drove panicky Israel to complain to Moses in the wilderness, melts hearts and erodes courage.

I am equally, if not more so, swept away by the courage of this widow. She harbored a wanted man and fed him out of her poverty. I am not worthy to speak her name, if I knew it, because I struggle with generosity in

my abundance. God does not need the abundance of our faith. The poverty is enough, the jug and jar of our meager resources.

Elijah and the widow are messengers of courage—the courage to face the drought, and know that substance comes not by principalities, but by the hand of God. Courage is not simply the virtue of the prophets, it is the necessity for all of us that can claim alongside Elijah, “the LORD is my God.”

Elijah said, that although all you have is a handful of meal and a little oil, it will be enough. And even though the drought did not lift, and scarcity was the reality, it turns out that Elijah was right. It was enough.

As we face our droughts, or perhaps as we find ourselves squarely in one, Elijah, this dead man talking, is calling us to face it with courage, and face it with fidelity. The pantry may be empty, but the life will be full.