

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
June 5, 2016

**“Provisions for Life -
When Life Unravels”**

“... The jar of meal will not be emptied and the
jug of oil will not fail until the day
the Lord sends rain on the earth.”
I Kings 17:14

Prelude

Over the course of the next few weeks,
during our summer worship,
most of our scripture lessons will come
from the Old Testament. In particular,
the readings will focus upon prophetic
voices that spoke once, that still speak,
a word for those seeking to be a wise and
faithful people.

To glance ahead -
we will have opportunity to renew
acquaintance with Amos and Hosea,
with Isaiah and Jeremiah,
among others.

There is an affirmation in our UCC
Statement of Faith, people and nations
are judged by the righteous will of God
“declared through prophets and apostles.”
Faith facilitates our quest to live a life
desired by God, life that
flourishes within the will of God.
And the prophets are indispensable guides;
they speak that we might hear and heed,
that ancient verities that serve to
promote our well being.

We may not always understand
the whys and the wherefores.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941),
the mystic scholar writing a century ago,
reminds us:

**“If God were small enough to be understood,
(God) would not be big enough to be worshipped.”**

Recall the psalm that questions:

**When I look to your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you
 have established;
what are human beings
that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

**Yet you have made them a little
lower than angels, and crowned them
with glory and honor
 (Psalm 8:3-5).**

So we are given knowledge sufficient
 to inspire awesome wonder,
 to instill trust,
 to live with an awareness of our limitations,
even as we are aware and attentive to the God
we worship; the God who dwells and abides with us.

When we exceed ourselves;
when we usurp the role and rule of God,
life can quickly unravel into conditions
never desired, never intended.

This is pretty much the situation that exists
when we turn to the 17th chapter of I Kings.

A sequence of “kings,” primarily in the northern kingdom of Israel, but just as often in Judah, Israel’s neighbor to the south, have pretty much made a mess of things.

War between these kindred neighbors has become normalized.

And if they aren’t in conflict with each other, then there is internal strife and competition factions vying for the reins of government, and the orchestration of power.

In the north, just prior to the 17th chapter, a series of regime changes had occurred, not through any contested election cycle, but by assassination. Near the end of the 16th chapter we read that a new king rule, Ahab, son of Omri. We are twice told upfront, right at the beginning:

“Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him ... Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord ... than all who were before him” (I Kings 16:30, 33).

So – we are at a point of great crisis.

And it is multidimensional:

political crisis;
theological crisis;
environmental crisis.

These are all related in the text; they overlap.

We have here a history, a recollection of life unraveling; it is, in the words of

Walter Brueggemann, **“the history of the first commandment and its violation”**

(see *I Kings*, p. 76).

The environment crisis is a climate crisis;
specifically, there is a drought;
there was no rain. No rain posed a problem,
not only for the king, but for all the people.
Those with little were reduced to less.
And those with less, became desperate.
They were running on empty,
and living on little more than hope.

We have two principle characters in our lesson,
Elijah, servant of the Lord, nemesis of the King, and
a poor widow from Zarephath (I Kings 17:8).

The drought conditions force Elijah first to the
east, on the sunrise side of the Jordan River,
where he finds a hiding place, the wadi Cerith.
And he worked for while, the Lord providing.
But then the water at the wadi dried up,
and Elijah needed to relocate, and the Lord
gave directions - knock on the door of the
widow living in Zarephath.

This movement is important, and I don't
want us to miss its significant. Under the
administration of King Ahab, the people
would have been taught, and they would
have bought, that they were an exceptional
people; that the gods favored them, and
would see them through the crisis being
imposed upon them. Ahab would have
been heard: we are gonna' make Israel
"great again;" we have "a future to believe in."
Elijah, though, wasn't home to hear that
message. He had ventured outside of
Ahab's realm; within the reach of God,
but beyond the reach of Ahab.

Elijah is trusting that where he was sent, God would provide; and if the provisions are depleted, another source would arise to keep him going. So the Lord speaks to Elijah: Get up, get going to Zarephath.

Now Zarephath is to the north and west of Ahab's realm. Zarephath is in the realm of Sidon. There is some irony at play here; Jezebel, Queen to Ahab being king, was from Sidon. She was trouble for Israel because her of zeal for misplaced loyalty.

We find the widow of Zarephath in desperate straights. She has meager provisions for a last meal, a jar and jug that don't amount to much; not enough to carry on.

And then Elijah makes his strange request. Do what you are intent upon doing, but first, feed me with what you have.

It is possible, I suppose, to hear this story, and assume Elijah is imposing himself on the widow, inserting himself, and chauvinistically saying: Gimme' what you have; feed me first. There is, though, a deep layer of stain at work in this story.

Elijah is holding on to his trust that provisions will come; Elijah challenges the widow to see that there is more in her jar and jug than meets the eye. Elijah brings a "fear not" into play, a confidence that though life is unraveling, still there is a cord available to which we might cling, to hold on, to see us through.

This is part of the lesson I want us to see this morning. In an “**extreme age**” such as ours, when it is tempting to think that life is unraveling in ways we can’t begin to fathom, God provides for us through unexpected people in unexpected places.

I was reminded of the story of Corrie Ten Boom this week, a woman of remarkable faith and conviction when facing horrible conditions of holocaust, who rescued others until her own arrest and placement in a concentration camp, who narrowly escaped the death that millions did not. She’s often remembered for her book, *The Hiding Place*, that tells her story. But the quote that came to my mind was this:

**“There is no pit so deep,
that God’s love is not deeper still.”**

The depths of our pits may seem
beyond the reach of God to remedy.
Yet the story of Elijah and
the widow of Zarephath suggest otherwise;
it is a counter-narrative we are invited to
see and grasp as part of our own:
God’s power is at work in the unexpected;
even in a drought,
dried up lives are nourished;
the small and insignificant
are raised up.
And the widow –
the widow we need to see as
poor, pagan, with nothing more than a
child, a few sticks and a desire to die;
yet an agent of mercy, a well of generosity,
compassionate and willing to comply
with Elijah’s plea.

And let's credit Elijah also -
he saw in the widow more than she could see in herself,
that she was a generating source capable of fueling
a tomorrow - for him, for her, and the child in her care.
Together they are an unlikely match,
showing us yet again,
 God surprises,
working for good in mysterious ways.
The jar and the jug, the meal and the oil,
 they flowed. God did not fail.

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Elijah casts a long shadow over time.
A people preserved in memory his
daring work and lively word.

Eight centuries separate Elijah and Jesus.
Some eight hundred years.
And we find Jesus aware,
Jesus a student of Elijah's
 prophetic ministry,
referencing Elijah and his encounter
with the woman of Zarephath
in his preaching at Nazareth (Luke 4:25-26),
preaching you recall
that enraged the home town folk,
who threatened violence.
As Walter Brueggemann once said,
the command of God
"sends people into high risk."
And yet, the command of God
is **"utterly reliable"** (see Brueggemann,
I Kings, p. 80).

Risk and reliability. These are the things
we can expect to come of our faith.
Risk and reliability. Cost and joy.

In the midst of life and its thickness,
God never fails to provide; always
there is bread, and company,
and mystic companionship,
that never ceases to satisfy.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*