

## Courageous Compassion

### Weekly Prayer

Provident God, whose love enfolds the helpless, the needy, and those who mourn, give us strength through Jesus Christ to be instruments of your compassion to those who are desolate or wounded by life. Amen.

### Focus Reading

1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24)

*Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 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." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 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." 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. 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." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.*

*(After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.")*

### Reflection by Kate Huey

Our story begins with an evil king, Ahab; a false god, Baal; and a terrible misunderstanding about just who exactly is in charge of things. Ahab rules over Israel, the northern kingdom (Judah was the southern kingdom), and we read that this king "did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him" (16:30). He's married to a foreign woman, Jezebel, from

Sidon, who has brought along her people's god, Baal, and just to make matters worse, she persuades Ahab to set up worship sites for this god. This is a huge mistake on Ahab's part, and he should have known better: there is, after all, a commandment about having false gods before the one true God. Onto the scene strides the great prophet Elijah, who delivers that message in no uncertain terms; in fact, he tells Ahab that there will be no rain for a very long time, "except by my word"--even though Ahab and Jezebel worship the so-called god of rain, storm, and fertility. Elijah declares the power of the One True God, not Baal, to bring the rains and end the drought, a message that does not go over well with Ahab. So God gets Elijah out of town for awhile, looking after him along the way by sending him ravens to bring him food, and leading him to a wadi that provides water for him to drink in the midst of the drought and the food shortage that must follow it.

The time comes when even these provisions are not enough, and when the drought worsens, God sends Elijah to--all places--Sidon, the very place Jezebel came from. Our passage begins here, with God giving Elijah what must seem like an incomprehensible command, to seek help from a nobody who has nothing: the great prophet has to rely on the kindness and generosity of a stranger, a poor widow, a foreigner who, presumably, is herself a worshipper of Baal. But the Bible is full of such irony: "While a Sidonian goes to Israel and works much mischief there," Tremper Longman III writes, "we now see God sending a faithful Israelite prophet to Sidon, and much good will result." Zarephath was actually a town situated between the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, on the Mediterranean Sea, and we will hear all these names again in the Gospels, in lessons about the gracious love of God that crosses all human-made boundaries.

For example, hearing that Elijah went to Sidon reminds us of the story in the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel when Jesus goes to the same area and meets the Syro-Phoenician woman, another foreigner driven by love for her child who opens up the compassion, and vision, of Jesus to share the "crumbs" of the children with "dogs," or gentiles (a stunning idea to some when it was preached in the early church). And when Jesus' hometown audience in Luke 4 found it hard to believe that one of their own could speak so graciously, he brought up this very story, about "a widow in Zarephath in Sidon" (4:26), and the amazing way God is at work in the most unexpected of places, with the most unlikely of people. Some of the best stories in the Bible, the ones that remind us of other really good stories in the Bible, seem to happen in those out-of-the-way, across-the-border places, with people who are on the margins and surprisingly important in the grand scheme of things after all. Even the second part of this passage from First Kings, about the raising of the widow's son, reminds us of the story in Luke 7 when another widow's son is raised by Jesus. And one recalls another poor pagan widow, Ruth, in the Old Testament, also a foreigner, whose tender and unconditional care for her forlorn mother-in-law, Naomi, mirrors that of God's own love and faithfulness, a love made flesh in Jesus.

### **Elijah's good news was good for the poor**

And so, while we know that Elijah was a great prophet, and lots of wonderful stories are told about him in the Old Testament, he--and his memory--play a role in the New Testament as well: his name comes up often when people wrestle with who Jesus is (for example, recall the crowd's reaction to his last words in Matthew 27:47). Like Jesus, Elijah's good news was particularly good for the poor, not the powerful and arrogant. While his preaching doesn't go over well with

Ahab and Jezebel, he does have a good word to bring to the poor but generous widow. Elijah begins with that always-reassuring good news, "Do not be afraid." Angels and prophets and Jesus himself tell us not to live in fear, no matter how things look. The widow, at the end of her rope and preparing to die with her son, has salvation unexpectedly arriving at her door. Where there was scarcity, there is suddenly sufficiency. Terence Fretheim makes an intriguing observation here, about the way God is at work supplying what the widow needs just as God had provided what Elijah needed out there in the wilderness, when he fled the courts of the powerful, and the birds of the air brought him food. Fretheim writes that "the activities of both God and creature are considered crucial in bringing life at each step," with the prophet himself, and the widow, and the birds all sharing what they have to offer: "effective power is exercised through the birds of the air, small gestures, meager resources, feeble words, human obedience, and the witness of a poor woman. Through such lowly means, God's work gets done, even in the most hostile of places."

Later, when the widow's son lies dead, Elijah is summoned once again to be the means by which God brings new life. Indeed, where there appears to be death, there is, amazingly, life! Small, powerless, and yet full of insight, the woman recognizes that this is not magic or the work of humans, but the hand of the true God at work in her life, and she makes the leap of faith to trust the word of this God.

### **A leap of hope**

Or could it be instead a leap of hope? Tremper Longman III makes an interesting claim when he says, "The demand that the prophet be fed first allows the widow to demonstrate faith in God." I find it a challenge to imagine that this poor, desperate woman has "faith" in any "G/god" (Elijah's or her own) at this point: after all, she is preparing herself, and her son, to die. I suspect that there are other things than faith at work in her at this moment, things we Christians don't focus on as quickly or as easily, and hope is one of those things. A reading like this one, in the midst of drought and famine, thirst and hunger, poverty and despair, provokes reflection on the phrase, "desperate hope," for desperation, or despair, paradoxically, suggests hope-less-ness. However, at the worst possible moments, hope can still persist deep within our hearts, no matter what God or god we have been raised to worship, and taught to place our faith in. Perhaps the word "desolation" fits the widow's situation even better, because it means "emptiness," and when there's nothing left, and you're totally empty, there is room for grace to move in. Could it be that surrounding ourselves with so many things, so many activities, so much noise, so many worries, makes it hard for us to open up our selves, our hearts, to God's love to fill in the empty places underneath it all? It's not that our spirits aren't hungry, maybe even starving, but if we fill ourselves with enough spiritual junk food, we may not even be around when the prophet bearing good news--and hope--arrives.

The widow of Zarephath, however, is around when the prophet arrives, and she is empty, so she has room in her heart for hope. Perhaps out of habit or societal pressure (it was, after all, a core practice in cultures at that time), she acts out the rituals of hospitality and generosity, sharing the little that she has with a stranger, making room in the last moments of her life for another, but pondering his words as she gathers a meager meal for him. In doing so, she enacts what Walter Brueggemann calls "otherwise," in his beautiful book on Elijah and Elisha, *Testimony to*

Otherwise. Brueggemann observes that the story of Elijah (and Elisha) breaks into a long account of what we call "history," an account of the kings leading up to Ahab (a rather grim narrative of successions and wars, infidelities and punishments, leading up to the disgrace of Ahab and Jezebel). He contrasts this history with these stories about prophets, stories that "open to the listeners in daring imagination the claim that the world does not need to be perceived or engaged according to dominant shapings of power, to privileged notions of authority, to conventional distributions of goods, or to standard definitions of what is possible." Years ago, when I majored in history in school, I had to learn what the "important" people did and when they did it, as if this were what really mattered, and were also something objective, something established in fact. I suppose such information is helpful in understanding the context in which the really important things happened, even if those really important things were going on in remote villages and at the bottom of society, in encounters, for example, between hungry prophets and desperate widows, the kind of thing you don't read about in history books.

### **A stubborn resolve to see and do "otherwise"**

That's what Brueggemann seems to be saying--and how much more important could an event be than bringing an only child back to life? Something important does happen when Elijah prays for the widow's dead son to be restored to life (an almost unimaginable thing to pray for); Brueggemann calls this something new in the life of someone who is "not privy to much newness." That's what "otherwise" means: the new, unimaginable, different way for things to turn out, instead of the worn-out, despair-producing, cynicism-provoking ways of thinking and acting that we believe to be the way the world has to work. It's no wonder, then, that Jesus stirred the memory of Elijah in his followers: "When the early church pondered Jesus, cadences of Elijah rang in their ears, because they sensed that Jesus was an enactment of a dangerous, healing, liberating otherwise that could not be stopped." Brueggemann then urges us not only to remember those "who keep reflowing the juices of possibility," like Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, but to see our own lives differently as well, "to reconstrue our own lives out beyond the closed definitions we have too long inhaled," to live--or venture out into--"the land of possibility," a "practice of imagination [that] is sacramental." In this way, we "let the Bible, its words and its claims, make contact with the life-and-death issues of our own time and place." Or, as Henri Nouwen put it, "the Christian...keeps saying that a new way of being human and a new peace are possible."

We might also note the many contrasts in this story, between power and powerlessness, hope and hopelessness, the "important" places in the center of things and the really important things and events that happen out on the margins. After all, Rebecca Kruger Gaudino, says, "This narrative asserts that God has locked down power in the usual places--palaces, marketplaces, capital cities--and identifies God's power in out-of-the-way places." And that might lead us to contrast Ahab and Elijah, or, as James Newsome suggests, the widow and Queen Jezebel: "Both women are Sidonians, presumably both are worshipers of Baal. The vast difference between them thus lies not in their nationality/ethnicity, or even in the nature of their religious beliefs, but in their levels of compassion." And this compassion, exercised in "the kindness of a stranger," teaches us about "the universal love of God, a love that reaches beyond the narrow confines of Israel or Judah." Today, in many situations, it requires a measure of courage to act out of compassion, especially for the stranger, the person on the margins, and the powerless who have little voice in the way

things are. In the face of that reality, Karl Allen Kuhn perceives a choice and a challenge in this book of the Bible, in "the contrast the author of 1 Kings is drawing through the wider narrative between the forces that lead to blessing and the forces that lead to destruction."

There are all sorts of wonderful things swirling around in this story: the power of God, the rains of mercy on parched earth and dried-up lives, the small ones lifted up, the generosity that transforms the direst of situations, the blessings of God multiplying in unexpected and unimagined ways. When we look around at our lives and the life of the world, what abundance do we see about to break forth because of unexpected generosity and surprising, courageous compassion?