

God Among Strangers
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 Kings 17: 8-16

Ahab the king of Israel had married Jezebel from the land of Sidon. She was a Baal worshiper and had brought her god with her.

And as for the people of Israel, they had given their hearts and minds over to Baal, turning away from worshipping God and instead worshipping this Canaanite god of thunder, the one who was said to ride on the clouds, bringing rain, bringing life to earth, bringing the water without which there would not be fertile soil.

But Elijah knew Baal was a false god, and he could see the people were trying to pursue life for themselves, but in reality, they had chosen death. And just to prove it, he knew that YHWH would prevent any storm Baal would try to send.

In fact, YHWH would prevent even a single drop of rain from falling even though this meant drought, crop failure, hunger, thirst and maybe even death. What would ensue would be a time of plague that threatened every man, woman and child... sort of the same way an invisible international pandemic does.

So Elijah he tells Ahab, who is considered to be the most wicked king that Israel ever had, that Israel isn't going to even see a drop of rain the next year because you and your wife Jezebel have led the people astray.

I have no idea what it's like to live through a sustained period of drought.

I mean, how do you make a pot of coffee without fresh water?

How do you keep yourself hydrated?

How do you boil eggs or potatoes or rice?

And that's not even thinking about washing dishes, clothes or hands; or for that matter, flushing toilets. To be honest, living in the region of the world that we do, we are so privileged to have all the fresh water we need, right at our beck and call.

Days passed. And then weeks. And then months. And then three and a half years where not a single drop of rain or dew hitting the land. During this time, Elijah had been hiding near a brook on the other side of the Jordan river, far away from Ahab because God had told him he needed to escape quickly or risk being killed for what he had said and done. It's not easy speaking truth to power.

And while he was there, Elijah was eating like a king, eating two full meals of meat a day, and drinking plenty of water to survive the drought. But eventually, the brook dries up and that's when God tells Elijah to go to the land that Jezebel was from, to the town of Zarephath.

It would be there that he would meet a stranger, a widow, who would feed him.

And that's where our story really begins.

Elijah finds this widow and asks her for something to eat. And I'm sure this woman had to have been thinking, you've got to be kidding me....

Here she was trying to find a few sticks to start a fire, so she could bake some bread from the last of the provisions in her pantry. It would probably be her and her son's last meal. No one was taking care of her, because at this point in the story, it was every person for themselves.

She was probably one of the last individuals Elijah should count on during a national disaster. Without a husband she had no income, no protection, no social standing and no hope.

The widow had given up on life. There wasn't any life in the land and she had finally surrendered to death. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing worth trying to live for at this point.

She was tired of just surviving.

But that wasn't going to be the end of her story. Elijah, by the word of God, tells her, "you're not going to run out of flour and oil before God sends rain on this land to end the drought. Now go eat and drink."

And it was so. The widow, one who had grown up to be a faithful worshipper of Baal, believed the word that God had given Elijah. And she didn't run out of oil. And she didn't run out of flour.

And most importantly, she didn't run out of hope. She and her son would continue to eat until the rain came just as Elijah had told her.

And like this widow, like the people of Israel, like Ahab and Jezebel, in times of peace and in times of stress we might think that money, power, or the right relationships will bring us life and nothing could be further from the truth.

God can certainly use those things, but it's God alone that brings life.

And I know many who are hearing my voice have personal life circumstances which have led to them live clinging to the very edge of trusting in God. Will my health get worse? Will hate and unrest destroy us? Will the virus win? Will the economy tank? Will this church be forever changed?

It is so hard living, clinging to the very edge of trust in God. But listen, people of our almighty God... God is faithful still. Things may change, new challenges may arise, but God is here and God hears.

God showed compassion to a stranger who had no care for God. YHWH isn't vindictive like Baal, ready to strike down all those who aren't in full devotion. Rather, through the words and actions of the prophet, God extends love and care to any who are willing to accept it.

No one is exempt from God's love, even when they come from the most broken of places. It's God's image in people that define people, and not their circumstances or beliefs. Love is an act of honoring the image of God in others and when we choose to not love others, we're choosing to not love God.

It is worth clinging to the very edge of trust in God, because when if things radically change, one thing is forever constant: God is faithful still. I can't help but think that God has some oil and flour waiting for all of us if we need it, if we want it, despite who are or what our past may be.

Our life circumstances will change over and over, but God's faithfulness never does. Thanks be to God. Amen.