

## **5.26.24 Journeying with Elijah – Serving a Mighty God of Abundance 1 Kings 17:8-16 Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Has God ever asked you to step out in faith and do something in a way that seemed surprising to you? In the Bible, this happens all the time. The word of the Lord, or an angel, or the Spirit tells someone to go somewhere or to do something that seems surprising, but when a person responds in faith and trust, amazing things happen. We see this over and over and we see it in today's story about the prophet Elijah, one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel.

A little background to help you picture the scene. King Omri's son, Ahab, became the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel in the year 874 BC and ruled for 21 years. Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the neighboring Sidonians. This seemed like good political policy, but it was a disaster religiously for Israel. After marrying Jezebel, Ahab served and worshiped, Baal, the god of the Sidonians, rather than the God of Israel. **1 Kings 16:33** says, ***“Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”***

The Lord sends Elijah to tell Ahab there's going to be a drought and it won't rain again until Elijah says so. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah and gave him specific instructions about where he should go, where to hide himself, where to find water, and the Lord concludes by saying, *“I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.”* How comfortable would you be with those instructions? If you like methodical, careful approaches to planning for the future, being told God's plan is for you to hide in a river valley and wait for ravens to bring you breakfast and dinner, might make you a little uncomfortable. After all, where do ravens get meat? They aren't bringing Elijah grilled teriyaki steak tips. When Jill and I were driving down Route 137 on Thursday on our way to BBC for movie night, a big black crow flew down and with its beak picked up the remains of some poor small creature that had been killed and flew away right in front of us. I said to Jill, *“That's how God fed Elijah!”* Give Elijah credit, he does what he's told to do even though it was surprising and required trust.

If that's not enough stepping out in faith, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah a second time and tells him, in a time of drought and hardship, to go to Zarephath, into the land of his enemy where Queen Jezebel is from, but don't worry, the Lord says, I've

commanded a widow there to feed you. At that time, a widow in a time of drought is not much of a step up from being fed by ravens, but to Elijah's credit, he once again responds obediently to the surprising voice of the Lord in **1 Kings 17:8-16**.

<sup>8</sup> Then **the word of the Lord** came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup> *"Go now to **Zarephath**, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."* <sup>10</sup> 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."* <sup>11</sup> As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, *"Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."* <sup>12</sup> 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."*** <sup>13</sup> 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."*** <sup>14</sup> 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.* <sup>15</sup> **She went and did as Elijah said**, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> 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.

This is a story about a powerful God, a worthy prophet, and a trusting widow. How do you trust God when you're asked to do something surprising? Can you trust God when you can't see a way forward, when things don't add up, when what you have seems insufficient for your present and future needs? These are the kinds of questions facing Elijah and the widow and perhaps some of us. Elijah is told to go to and live in the region of his enemy and to trust a poor widow to give him shelter and food. That's surprising and disconcerting. The widow is planning to use her final ounces of meal and oil to make a last supper for herself and her son before they die of starvation, and Elijah tells her **to first** make a little cake of it and to give it to him, and **afterwards** to make something for herself and her son. How much faith, trust, and compassion does it take to share your last morsel of food with **a stranger** rather than keeping it for your child

and yourself? The widow is confronted with the choice of having a scarcity or an abundance mentality and to take a big step of faith in trusting Elijah's word and his God.

Henri Nouwen writes about a scarcity mindset in his book, *Bread for the Journey*, "As fearful people we are inclined to develop a mind-set that makes us say: "There's not enough **food** for everyone, so I better be sure I save enough for myself in case of emergency," or "There's not enough **knowledge** for everyone to enjoy; so I'd better keep my knowledge to myself, so no one else will use it" or "There's not enough **love** to give to everybody, so I'd better keep my friends for myself to prevent others from taking them away from me." This is a scarcity mentality. It involves hoarding whatever we have, fearful that we won't have enough to survive. The tragedy, however, is that what you cling to ends up rotting in your hands."

**"The opposite of a scarcity mentality is an abundancy mentality.** With an abundancy mentality we say: "There is enough for everyone, more than enough: food, knowledge, love ...everything." With this mind-set we give away whatever we have, to whomever we meet. When we see hungry people we give them food. When we meet ignorant people we share our knowledge; when we encounter people in need of love, we offer them friendship and affection and hospitality and introduce them to our family and friends. **When we live with this mind-set, we will see the miracle that what we give away multiplies: food, knowledge, love ... everything.** There will even be many leftovers."<sup>[1]</sup> God is encouraging us to be open to God's surprising instructions and to have an abundance mentality, not a scarcity mentality.

This encounter of Elijah and the widow was so significant that when Jesus was preaching in his home synagogue in Nazareth, which you can read about in **Luke 4:16-30**, he refers to it. After reading a passage from Isaiah 61 Jesus tells all those listening, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled."* Some people were amazed, and some were dismissive. This is Joseph's son, how can he claim to be the filled with the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*.

**Jesus responds in Luke 4:25-26.** *“the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.”* Sidon was an ancient city on the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon. Jesus says, at a time when there were needy widows in Israel, God sent a Hebrew prophet to bless a Lebanese widow. What does that tell you about the scope of God’s concern? How does that influence your faith today? How does that impact how we should see other people we might consider beyond God’s concern, love, or grace? What was the response of the congregation to Jesus reminding them of this Elijah story from their own scripture? They tried to kill him, because people often don’t like to hear things that challenge the way they see the world.

Back in 1 Kings 17, things were going great for Elijah, the widow, and her son. They have a never-ending supply of meal and oil during a severe famine. The widow is thanking God she stepped out in faith and trusted Elijah and gave to God before feeding herself and her son. Then disaster strikes. The son becomes ill and dies. The poor mother cries out to Elijah (1 Kings 17:19), and he says to her, *“Give me your son.”* Perhaps Elijah did a little CPR because (v. 21) *“he stretched himself upon the child three times,”* and he prays to the Lord on the boy’s behalf, and the Lord listens and the son is revived and reunited with his overjoyed mother who proclaims her belief that Elijah is a man of God.

This is the first story of its kind in the Bible, but it’s not the last. Following the example of Elijah, Jesus restores several people to life. The first is Jairus’s daughter in **Mark 5:35-43**. Jesus says something to Jairus before reviving his daughter which is good advice for us in any situation (Mark 5:36), ***“Do not fear, only believe.”*** In the story that’s most like that of Elijah and the widow, in **Luke 7:11-17**, Jesus and his disciples, followed by a large crowd are entering a town called Nain, just as a funeral procession is leaving it. The dead man was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, *“Do not weep.”* Then Jesus restored the man to life and gave him to his mother, just as Elijah had done. Jesus also raises Lazarus from the dead in John 11. In that situation, Jesus gives an instruction that’s surprising to everyone present. He says (John 11:39), ***“Take***

**away the stone.**” Lazarus’s sister Martha replied. *“Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”* This is the most extreme case of someone being restored to life because Lazarus had been dead the longest. **Jesus said to her (John 11:40), “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”** **After praying, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out and he does to the amazement of everyone.** Over and over in the Bible and in our lives, God will ask us to do things that seem surprising or unexpected, but when we believe and trust and respond in faith, then like Martha and Mary, we will see the glory of God.

Last Sunday, David Pranga preached about the coming of the Holy Spirit to the first believers in Jerusalem and the rest of the Book of Acts is the story of how the Spirit worked through individuals who listened to and obeyed the leading of the Spirit which led to the church growing, and the kingdom of God expanding and advancing. Like with Elijah and the widow, and Martha and the stone at the grave, the Spirit often told the early disciples to do surprising things and they obeyed and amazing things happened. Three quick examples. At the end of Acts 7, Stephen who is one of the first Deacons is stoned to death and then *“a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem”* (Acts 8:1). Rather than shrinking the church, the persecution causes many disciples to leave Jerusalem and they share the good news about Jesus everywhere they go, and which leads to the Gospel spreading more widely and reaching more people.

**Acts 8:26–40** starts with these words: Then an angel of the Lord said to **Philip** (in a similar way to the word of the Lord coming to Elijah), *“Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”* (It’s amazing how ancient these places are isn’t it?). **“So he got up and went.”** At the same time, an Ethiopian official who had traveled to Jerusalem for worship was returning to Ethiopia. Acts 8:29 says, **Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”** So, Philip ran up to it...and he hears the official reading Isaiah, and Philip proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus, and the official is baptized by Philip in water along on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The story marks the beginning of the Ethiopian Church in north Africa. All this happens because Philip hears and discerns the word of the Lord, and he trusts, obeys, and responds. This happens repeatedly in Acts. It happens with Paul and his ministry team in **Acts 16:9-10** (NIV). Paul had a vision of a man of

Macedonia standing and begging him, *“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* After Paul had seen the vision, he and his team got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, to preach the gospel to them. In **Acts 10** the Spirit orchestrates bringing together Cornelius a Centurion of the Italian Cohort and the Apostle Peter. Cornelius was a generous and prayerful man, and he has a vision of an angel who gives him detailed instructions to find Simon Peter and to bring him to his home. He’s even told the location of the house by the seaside where Peter is staying. The next day, Peter’s up on the roof praying and he has a vision and then the Spirit says to him, *“Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.”* You can read the rest of the story for yourself, but both Cornelius and Simon were prayerfully open to God, they trusted and responded immediately with obedience to the leading of the Spirit, and as a result, they both grew in their understanding of God and more people came to faith, received the Spirit and were baptized. This is how God works.

Has God ever asked you to step out in faith and to do something in a way that seemed surprising to you? The Spirit is still speaking to the church just as the Spirit did in the Book of Acts in the first century and in the days of Elijah. No matter how surprising the instructions – meals provided by ravens? A widow will provide. Roll away the stone. Go to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Go to Macedonia, I have sent these men, go with them without hesitation – no matter the instructions, when the Spirit of God speaks, may be as trusting, faithful, and obedient as Elijah and the widow, Philip, Paul, Cornelius, and Peter, so the kingdom of God may grow and expand in and through us. We serve a mighty God!

**Blessing:** “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen” (Hebrews 13:20-21).

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Has God ever asked you to step out in faith and to do something in a way that seemed surprising to you? What happened? How did things turn out?
2. What do you find surprising in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath?
3. How is trust and faith required both by Elijah and the widow for God's will to be accomplished? What does each of them need to do?
4. How would you describe the difference between a scarcity mentality and an abundance mentality?
5. The miracle of the jar of meal and the jug of oil is exceeded by Elijah praying for widow's son to come back to life, the first, but not the last such story in the Bible. At this moment in your life, how are you being challenged to trust in a mighty God of abundance who can even bring life out of death?
6. What do you learn about living a life of faith from this story of God sending a Jewish prophet to a Lebanese widow in 1 Kings 17:8-24?