

“The Word of the LORD Cares for Elijah and a Widow”

1 Kings 17:8-16

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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They were troubled times in Israel. Ahab was king. God’s word says that Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all [the kings] who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30 ESV). Ahab built an altar and temple for Baal in Samaria and offered sacrifices to Baal on that altar. He married a woman named Jezebel. She was a daughter of the king of the Sidonians. She worshiped Baal. She loved the exercise of power and used it to do whatever she wanted. One of the things she did was order that all the prophets of the LORD be killed. In response to her order, the LORD raised up a prophet named Obadiah who feared the LORD. He preserved 100 of the LORD’s prophets by hiding them in a cave and feeding them with bread and water (1 Kings 18:4).

Jezebel was also the mastermind behind the conspiracy against Naboth so that King Ahab could take Naboth’s vineyard, which he coveted. Naboth was a man of faith and a faithful subject of the king. Yet, Jezebel came up with a plan to get Naboth killed by false accusation. With Naboth out of the way, Ahab took Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21).

It was in Ahab’s days that God raised up the prophet Elijah. The LORD gave Elijah the authority to decree to King Ahab that there would not be either dew or rain in Israel until Elijah decreed that it should rain (1 Kings 17:1-2). So, it did not rain. There was drought. As a result of the drought, there was a shortage of food. There was famine.

In the midst of all of this, the LORD provided for Elijah and a woman and her son at Zarephath, which was a town that belonged to Sidon, not Israel. It happened like this. The “word of LORD” came to Elijah and told him what to do (1 Kings 17:8). This “word of the LORD” was God the Son, who became Christ our Lord. It is as the Apostle John says in his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2, 14).

So the “word of the LORD” commanded Elijah to go to Zarephath. He said that He had commanded a widow there to feed Elijah.

The word “command” is used here. This is not like a command in the sense of the ten commandments that regulates behavior. It is, rather, a command in the sense of causing something to happen. And what the word of the LORD caused to happen was saving and preserving Elijah and the widow and her son. The LORD was motivated to do this by His own goodness and initiative, by pure grace and gift, according to His will and plan.

Command also has the sense of authority and power. So the word of the LORD has the authority and power to do the saving thing He has determined to do, which the word of the LORD announces.

It is also important to see that the command by the word of the LORD is something that could be believed, or not. It calls forth faith. What does it say that Elijah did when he heard this command from the word of the LORD? It says that Elijah arose and went to Zarephath (1 Kings 17:10), just as the word of the LORD had told him to do. What does it say that the widow did when Elijah told her to get him some water and some bread? It says that Elijah and the widow did what the word of the LORD had said. Their faith in the word of the LORD was shown by what they did.

When Elijah got to Zarephath, he saw a widow there just outside the city gates. She was

gathering sticks. He asked her for some water. She went to get it (1 Kings 17:10-11). As she was going, he asked her for a small portion of bread. At this she explained that she only had a handful of flour left and a little oil (1 Kings 17:12). She was in the process of making the last little cake from it so she and her son could eat. But then she expected that that would be their last meal, since they had no food left.

It is important to note that she explained this to Elijah by making reference to the LORD, the living God of Israel. She said to Elijah, “As the LORD your God lives” (1 Kings 17:12). This creates a significant contrast between this widow and Jezebel. Jezebel was also from Sidon, but she served and worship Baal, the false god of the Sidonians. The widow had faith in the one, true Living God. Jezebel was also ruthless and loved the exercise of power for her own ends, according to her own judgements. This poor widow, on the other hand, had nothing, except a little bit of flour and a little bit of oil. But she also had the word of the LORD and faith in that word. She was also commanded by the word of the LORD to take care of the prophet, the prophet whom Jezebel wanted to kill. Jezebel had royal power and plenty to eat, while her subjects starved, but she was dead and empty in heart and soul. The other woman, the widow of Zarephath had very little and no power, and yet she was full in heart and soul and would see what the LORD can do. This widow is highly esteemed in the kingdom of God. Jezebel was despised not esteemed at all in the kingdom of God.

Elijah responded to the widow. He told her not to be afraid; this was the first thing. Do not be afraid. This is the first thing because she was undoubtedly very much afraid. Things were dire, indeed, and the circumstances quite fearful.

The Lord says to you, “Do not be afraid.” He backs that up because He has overcome all things. They put Him to death, but He lives again from the dead, and lives and reigns to be with you always.

Then Elijah told her to go and first make him a little cake of the remaining flour and oil, and then make some for herself and her son (1 Kings 17:13). Elijah did it this way because it was the opportunity for her to exercise her faith. Along with telling her to do these things, Elijah spoke the promise by the word of the LORD. Here is the promise: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth’” (1 Kings 17:14 ESV).

The widow did not judge and condemn Elijah at his instructions. She went and did as Elijah told her because she went in the faith of what was promised from the LORD. She could make a cake first for Elijah because she feared God and believed the promise. The flour would not be spent and the oil would not run out because the LORD had said so. She believed that the LORD would provide for her and her son according to the promise spoken by Elijah in the name of the LORD.

The LORD was faithful to the promise that He had caused Elijah to speak. The jar of flour never became empty. The oil did not run out. This happened according to the word of the LORD that he, the word of the LORD, spoke by Elijah. The word of the LORD is active and powerful and does what it says. It creates out of nothing and accomplishes the purpose for which God sent it (Romans 4:17; Isaiah 55:11).

Things were looking bad for Elijah and the widow, but the LORD had a plan. He revealed this plan according to His promise. They believed the LORD’s promise and saw what the LORD can do.

God’s promises are true and real for you in Jesus Christ our Lord, who also died for our forgiveness, to turn away God’s wrath, and lives from the dead to be the living life of faith in our

souls. Live and work in faith in Him and His promises. Seek Him, your Savior, Jesus, who is the word of the LORD and your great brother. He knows what you need and is already working things out. Continue in His word and Sacrament, because it is in these things that you know His faithfulness and promise, and the power of His word. He is there for you, and He will do it. Thanks be to God. Amen.