

We Are Not Emptied

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I Kings 17:8-16

Two pieces of news to share.

When I stood for General Assembly moderator some two years ago, there were three candidates – myself, Heath Rada (who eventually prevailed) and Kelly Allen, a minister from San Antonio. I didn't know Kelly at all before this experience and we've not stayed close since, but for a season, our connection was intense, and I've come to appreciate her ministry in Texas. On Friday, Kelly suffered a brain aneurism while speaking at a conference – she is not expected to recover. I shared a message with her family yesterday telling them that I, and we, would be holding her, her family and her congregation in our prayers as we gather today.

And one week ago, Christopher Ragus died. You may not remember Chris Ragus' name, but you see his work all around you. Chris was the architect for our renovation and restoration in 2008 and 2009. He worked closely with our sanctuary architect Terry Eason, and also single-handedly helped us envision the Gosnell Cloister, a new hub for accessibility with ramps and elevator, a new Johnston Hall and Celebration Center, a new kitchen and renewed choir spaces. His fingerprints, literally and figuratively, are all over this place. We were privileged to host his memorial service here Friday, and we continue to hold his family and colleagues in our prayers.

Buried deep in the recesses of the Old Testament are stories you may or may not remember from Sunday School. This morning offers such a story, from I Kings, set in the midst of prophets and kings and the identification of Elijah as leader, gifted as a person of God. God tells Elijah to travel to a village called Zarephath to live. Already God has set things in motion because God tells Elijah that a widow will feed him once he arrives. They meet at the gate and Elijah requests that the widow – unnamed – bring him food and drink. That's the plan. She responds that as much as she'd like to, she can't. There is no lack of will, simply a lack of resources. She is, in fact, gathering a few sticks to prepare a final meal for herself and her son because there is no food and they are prepared – literally – to starve to death.

It is an unsettling moment. Has God made a mistake in setting this all up? A hungry prophet encountering 1., a widow who lives in the very margins of society with her young son who 2.,

not only has no food to offer in her quest for hospitality but is preparing for her own death and, heartbreakingly, the death of her son.

Yet scarcity will not be the narrative that wins. Elijah responds in the way that is so often the response of faith. “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid the Bible continually reminds us, when faced with an untenable situation. Stick with your plan, gracious widow, Elijah says, but first take the meager resources you have and give me a little bit.

It seems very odd, if not downright offensive. You are starving to death, as is your son, but first feed me. Do not be afraid. So she does. Elijah is fed, and the woman is fed, and her son is fed. And not only is it NOT their last meal, they eat for days to come. Somehow, inexplicably, the meal for the cakes and the oil to cook them with do not run out. “The jar of meal was not emptied; neither did the jug of oil fail...” This is God’s doing. Do not be afraid.

Kathryn Schifferdecker writes that it is surprising when Elijah says “do not be afraid.” “Easy for you to say, we might imagine her thinking. You’re not the one preparing to cook one last meal for yourself and your son before you die. You’re not the one who has watched your carefully-hoarded supply of flour and oil relentlessly dwindle day-by-day, week-by-week, as the sun bakes the seed in the hard, parched earth and the wadis run dry. You’re not the one who has watched your beloved son slowly grow thinner and more listless...What business has this man of God to ask her for bread, she who has so little? What business has he, asking her for bread before she feeds herself and her son? There is not enough to go around...There is not enough. And Death waits at the door.”

Juliana Claassens invites us to consider this widow, and, by extension I would say, all she represents. “As widow,” Claassens writes, “this woman has known her share of misery. She has lost her husband and is struggling to care for her child. (She lives) in a state of precarious (suffering) from failing social and economic networks of support and...exposed to injury, violence, and death.”

Can we think about all who this unnamed widow represents? As we think about education reform, can we think about every parent everywhere who loves their child and who wants only the best for them, yet who labors under such adverse and unequal circumstances? This week we heard again such parents being blamed for their own plight and the academic failure of their children. Do we not know better?

Can we think about all who this unnamed widow represents? As we think about hunger and homelessness, can we think about the families that lived in Third Church this week, as we turned our education building into a temporary shelter? Work, transportation, school, all seem so precariously difficult when there is no food to eat and no place to rest your head, to play

with your child, to find simple rest before heading out again early the next morning to face it all again.

Can we think about all who this unnamed widow represents? As we think about our own fears and scarcities, physical and emotional and spiritual, can we think about ourselves and those around us who will come to this table to receive just a little bit of bread and a sip of juice? What do we need to feel loved, to feel accepted, to feel whole?

Michael J. Chan writes that Elijah “speaks crazy talk. When his eyes see only scarcity, he talks about abundance. The prophet assumes provision, when the widow’s words speak only of desolation. Elijah brings a word of faith into a moment of deep fear and resignation...Elijah’s words, although seemingly absurd, actually invite the widow to participate in the new reality God’s promises were creating, but which for the moment remain hidden from view.”

What is our calling? How shall we respond? Can we place ourselves in both roles – the role of the widow and the role of the prophet? We may not be facing a death-dealing drought. We may not be living on the economic and cultural margins. But we may be. We may be facing death itself or countless variations of death. Without this ever seeming casual or cavalier, how do we live like the widow and seek abundance in the face of scarcity, food for our bodies and the ones we love, whether physical food or spiritual food?

Or how do we live like the prophet and serve as a messenger of that abundance. How do we say “do not be afraid” to a world driven by fear, to those we love, even to ourselves, and offer the sustenance that simply does not run out?

Michael Chan writes that “we are...called to bring a sustaining word of promise from the outside.” What will that look like?

Can we, as Kathryn Schifferdecker writes, especially we who live in material abundance, be the “unlikely (messengers) who proclaim God’s abundance? There is enough for all. There is more than enough. Will we be not only the messengers, but also the means by which God shares that abundance with our neighbors, those on the other side of town and those on the other side of the world?”

And even as we offer abundance, can we receive it? Can we face our fear and receive abundance, in whatever form it takes, in whatever ways we need it?

The gospel we embrace, and the gospel that embraces us, is an ongoing story of a God whose grace breaks in when it is most needed, a God who heals, a God who feeds, in the face of precarious deprivation.

The jar of meal that was not emptied, nor the jug of oil. Our calling is to share God's abundance with people in need, with a world in need, to feed until the healing rains come. And when those moments or seasons come upon us, we receive that very abundance. We find our place at God's table, and are fed, until we hunger no more. Amen.