

“The Nameless Widow”
Sermon delivered 6-6-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Neal Collins, Pastor

1 Kings 17:17–24

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. ¹⁸She 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!" ¹⁹But 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. ²⁰He 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?" ²¹Then 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." ²²The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³Elijah 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." ²⁴So 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."

For years I focused on Elijah as the hero of this story in the face of King Ahab. Another David and Goliath story where the underdog by the grace of God turns the tables once again. There is a single mother, not given a name by the story teller, not even Jewish, who meets Elijah at the gate of Zarephath with no nickels to rub together and literally preparing the last supper for her and her son by gathering wood for the fire. This morning I invite you to hear from this nameless widow about generosity and compassion.

Before we begin, it is important for you to take a step back from our first reading this morning to see the big picture. The big picture begins with King Ahab taking Jezebel to be his wife in the Northern Kingdom. She is from Sidon, about 9 miles from where our nameless widow resides. She, like the nameless widow, is not a Jew but a follower of Baal. Baal is known as the Storm God, who responsible for the rain. When Jezebel became the wife of King Ahab she managed to get an Altar to Baal built in the Northern Kingdom. This upset the Lord. He sent Elijah to announce there would be no rain in the land until he said so, and there wasn't for three years.

The Lord instructed Elijah to hide in Wadi Cherith, to drink from the Wadi. Ravens would bring him bread in the morning, and meat in the evening. The Wadi dried up. The ravens stop coming. The Lord instructed Elijah to go to Zaraphath in Sidon on the Mediterrean Coast. He meets this nameless widow and requests water. Then, as she is getting it, he asked for bread. She said, as the Lord you God lives (meaning she is not Jewish) I have no bread, only a handful of meal and a small jar of oil. Elijah reassures her that she will not go hungry or thirsty until the rains come. She complies with his wishes for food.

They are both having a dry spell in their lives. Every one of you sitting here this morning has been through such a period, in such a period, or are scared of facing a drying spell in your life. You know the desperation. You want to trust God, believe things are going to work out. We all have a fear of being at the bottom, dependent, helpless, scared, and on the verge of resignation. It takes courage to hope against hope. When the widow encounters Elijah, she is preparing for her and her son to die. When there is absolutely nothing left, the grace of God can work. We may not be suffering this morning from physical hunger, but what about the spiritual hunger in your life? You may not recognize the hunger because of all the junk you may be stuffing yourself with to avoid feeling the depth of your being.

Can you imagine someone asking to borrow a hundred dollars from you when your cards are maxed out and you have ten dollars? This is the only way I can imagine how this nameless widow felt when Elijah requested bread and water. Nevertheless, she acted hospitality and generosity. Can you remember when you first discovered yourself to be a generous person? Where were you? What was asked of you? What did you do? You are probably more generous than you know.

Just a few years ago, in the 1960's, there was a coffee house in the Northwest section of Washington, D.C. ran by a Pastor named Gordon Cosby of the Church of The Savior. The ministry involved working and living with the inner city poor. Doctors would volunteer their time at the clinic, and they had one of the first food pantry's with gardens in the inner city. Gordon attracted people from all over the country to work in his ministry. One day he shared an experience as a Pastor in Lynchburg, VA when a deacon in a small Baptist Church wanted his help. The deacon said, "We have in our congregation a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered she is putting into the treasury of the church 4 dollars a month, a tithe of her income. Of course she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk to her and let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever, and free her from the responsibility. Gordon said he wasn't wise now and a lot less then when he told her in a gracious manner she was relieved of her responsibility. As he talked tears came to her eyes and she said, "I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning."

But where is God in all of this? The God whom Elijah did the neat trick of perpetual flour and oil until the rains came yet the boy died and the mother asked Why? Like any mother would ask. Why? Both the nameless widow and Elijah complained. The good news turns sour with the death of her son. She is treated by God as others have treated her according to Bruggman. Elijah prays three times for life to return to this child and throws himself on the child. Life returns to the boy. A miracle. How do we frame this story for our own lives? If we just prayed enough, hard enough, long enough for a miracle it will happen. What is the point? This woman wasn't

Jewish. She was of the House of Baal. She said to Elijah you have caused the death of my son (who was going to die with his mother at the beginning of the story).

The story of this nameless widow, her generosity and compassion, and the resurrection of her son points beyond just the moment. Like all miracles they are short term. Everyone Jesus ever healed died. This story points to the human heart and to the heart of God. The storyteller, whose stories would be difficult for many to follow in our modern world spoke of God's presence of a widow and son who is dying being fed and a dead son brought to life, only to die again.

The intention of any miracle is to point to point beyond to the "eighth day", the day of the resurrection, eternity where dry spells will cease, where weeping happens through the night but joy comes in the morning according to the psalmist. Wherever you find yourself this morning, tomorrow morning, know you are in the presence of God. Know if you are in a dark place to accept the invitation to enter into the emptiness of your soul as this nameless widow did with a spirit of generosity as opposed to bitterness. Know if you are in a miraculous place this morning remind yourself of the miracle of the generosity, love, and the mercy of God in your life.