



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Abiding Astonishment

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Text: 1 Kings 17: 8-16

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’ 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.’ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ 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.’ 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. 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.’ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 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.



Sermon:

There are two books of Kings in the Old Testament. As I thought about this reading today and as I thought about you, forgive me if I made an assumption that is not quite true. But I believe that it is likely that for most of us here in this room, the two books of Kings are not exactly favorite reading. These books are largely unfamiliar; these books are called out for specific times in the liturgical calendar year, but my bet is that most of us in this room don’t have a deep understanding of what happens in the books, except for the fact that they deal with *kings*.

They begin so well. In the first book, King David is on his deathbed, and he offers a charge for his son Solomon. With his final breath, he says, “Be strong, my son; be courageous. Keep the charge of the Lord your God to look out for the poor and the outcast, the widows and the lost. Most of all, Solomon, please, be faithful in your heart.” However, if you keep on reading the books of Kings, it goes so wrong so quickly. The two books of Kings read like a news cycle caught in an awful loop, with each turn of the page the same story presents itself—corrupt leaders forsaking their duties in order to pursue power and wealth—can you imagine such a time?

Granted unlimited, unparalleled wisdom, Solomon was the one who builds the temple—the holy of holies—charged by his father to do good and to care for the sick and needy—so quickly forsakes his fidelity all for the sake of riches, earthly alliances, and way too many dalliances. He even forces his own people back into slave labor—the very condition God freed them from in Egypt in order to build himself and his palace up to dizzying heights.

And if you have the courage to keep going, in mind-spinning fashion the cast of characters in the Book of Kings keeps changing. New people ascend into the circle of power, with names like Rehoboam, Jeroboam and Omri, rising for their fifteen minutes or fifteen verses of fame. What follows for each of them is always the same—lies, deceit, in fighting, sacrificing the men of Israel in battle—not for the common good but for their own gain. What inevitably results from that is also always the same—their kingdoms lost, their names forgotten and their legacies summed up in the same way in the Book of Kings; they walked in the same ways as their ancestors; like father like son, Kings intones, each time with this concluding sentence: “They did evil in the sight of the Lord.”

By the 16th chapter of 1st Kings, there is now no end in sight and the weight of it becomes nearly unbearable with each turn of the page. Each new day carries the same news—getting worse and worse. In fact, in Chapter 16, King Ahab is described as doing more evil than all of the kings who came before him. Just when it seemed like it couldn't get any worse, onto the scene without foreshadowing comes a most unexpected interruption into this cycle of woe. When people's backs were breaking and hopes were waning, something decisive happens—Elijah, the Tishbite of Gilead suddenly bursts onto the scene. Elijah, whose name literally means *Yahweh is my God* walks right up to Ahab with words of confrontation and condemnation: “Drought is coming,” Elijah proclaims. “Your worst nightmare is upon you.”

You see, the Promised Land may have the land of milk and honey, but it was and is a land of water scarcity, always facing the dire threat of drought. But the promise of Biblical faith summed up in Hebrew Scriptures—the promise David invoked for his son Solomon—is that Yahweh, God, the Creator, the one who calmed the waters and brought forth dry land, who caused water to flow from rocks in the desert and springs to gush forth from the hills, who troubles the water of Solomon's temple for healing—that God has guaranteed water not just to sustain life but for that which is necessary for luxurious abundant life, and that God—the one whose covenant the kings have forsaken—is now turning off the faucet in response to all those covenantal violations. Elijah the Tishbite, tells the king that only he, who speaks for God, and whom we call the prophet—only he can speak from God's grace and at God's command can turn it back on.

Of this moment in this obscure book, Walter Brueggemann simply says that it is impossible to overstate its historical, literary and theological significance. This is a turning point, for it is a beacon to the truth that real authority, real power, and real energy always lie outside the power brokers of the time. They emerge just like David said the would when we are faithful, strong, and courageous and when we follow the way, the truth and the life offered with every breath by the holy of holies. So Elijah bursts onto the scene, delivers this message of condemnation, and then God drives him out into the wilderness. Elijah, a man whose power is unrivaled in Hebrew Scripture, starts his ministry as utterly vulnerable. He is dependent on crows to bring him his food. And he is dependent on the *wadi* for his water. I need to tell you that of the two things, the most reliable and the thing you can count on the most are the crows. That will convey how vulnerable he was. For a wadi is a wet spot only in the rainy season, a place where water gathers but he is in the midst of a drought so by definition that wadi is going to dry up and disappear. So Elijah—this man

of power—goes into the wilderness not just to be obedient, although Kings makes it clear that he is perfectly obedient but instead to become dependent, which means to live in a context of extreme vulnerability and to be deeply at risk. This prophet who previously wielded unseen power learned instead what it means to have none. It is this moment, not of giving up but of surrendering that changes the entire course of Biblical and human history.

From this wilderness experience, Elijah is sent to Zarephath to a widow. She is a woman who has been made most vulnerable not by the call of her God but by the neglect of her king and her community. She has been made a widow by the death of her husband, and given the age of her son—her husband likely died in one of those battles fought at the command of royalty for royalty's sake, for to be a widow in that time was to exist perpetually in the wilderness, preyed upon by the powerful, who had actually been called upon by God to protect her. She is not given a name—not because the Bible wants to denigrate her individual position—but instead so that she might serve as an example, a cipher for the powerless, the un-credentialed and the disadvantaged. In this story, she is made to be emblematic for all those for whom the endless cycle of bad news brings on despair and hopelessness.

But God sends Elijah to her—the needy and the vulnerable seeking out the despairing and there at the gate—at the boundary marker from wilderness to settlement, he finds and asks for what he so desperately needs—water, but before she leaves, he asks her for something else—he asks for a morsel of bread, bread enough for the day is what that phrase means. In other words, Elijah asks her for his daily bread. And in that moment, that is where the miracle of the story truly unfolds, for she tells him that she has given up. She tells him that she is starving to death. In this land of plenty, she has none. Her king, whose charge it is to care for her has failed her. Her people have failed her. And she can see no end in sight for own cycle of her pain and sufferings. She is terrified knowing that she can no longer care for her son—her sacred charge, and with that bleak outlook, she is getting ready to prepare one last meal—one last supper. And then she is prepared to give in, to give up, and to die.

But Elijah tells her what all of us who live in times of fear and foreboding and of endless news cycles of despair need to hear. Elijah says, “Do not fear.” For in these desperate times of drought and hunger, Don't give up; don't give in; instead surrender to God the life giver. When human beings fail you, when leaders abandon morality and their sacred duty to the poor and vulnerable, don't give up, for that is when miracles happen. That is when people reach out to one another and the miracle happens. The miracle unfolding in our reading today is not that of bread raining down from heaven, but instead a simple jar of meal refusing to empty—daily bread given; daily bread received. The miracle unfolds when the lost and the lonely come together and in their fellowship and their mutual care, their asking and giving, seeking and receiving—God's abundance is found, even in a morsel of bread. The narrative does not explain how this miracle happens. It does not care to nor does it need to. It simply is a wonder that the flour, the meal remains abundant—an act that draws us into amazement and reminds us how through human agents God exerts agency. Through our hands and mutual care, the holy one acts. God can and does override killing scarcity with enough—with more than enough—with abundance.

It is fitting that on a morning when snowflakes gently wafted down, that we get to the beauty of this text, for this reading is assigned to a liturgical season when we are preparing for the season of Advent and the intrusion that God breaks into the world through the Christ child. The act of love made manifest—this appearance of Elijah, the one who spoke for God—God's truthful word in the world—comes before our hearts' eyes as we prepare to receive the Christ child. It is the very

model of Elijah and his human agency acting for human flourishing that the ministry of Jesus will be solidly based upon and then blow right past. The whole point of this story is to remind us of the miraculous. Martin Buber elegantly describes the miraculous as “abiding astonishment,” an event that lingers with us, dwells within and among us and is an event retold in the life of a community with an enduring capacity in each retelling and rehearing. That is the Advent miracle story, retold that we might remember—that we might reopen our individual and collective lives to the gifts of God that are just waiting to break forth. It is a fitting text for this day as our world and hearts slowly turn through giving thanks to waiting again for the newness of the Christ child to interrupt the powers of the world and bring hope to people who sit in the midst of a bad, seemingly never ending news cycle—to remind us once again never to give up but instead to surrender, but it is also beautifully and perfectly fitting that this passage comes to us on Veteran’s Day, a day where we honor those who have shone the very courage and strength David prayed for Solomon. It is a time to honor and remember those who were sent into harm’s way by those who sit on earthly thrones—those who were sent and came back home. And yet we are all too painfully reminded by our endless news cycle that those who do come home bear the burdens of their service, suffering often in silence what they saw and experienced, unable to express what they experienced, because none of us would be able to understand. Or they carried the fear of having to relive it all over again.

Recently, veterans, researchers and the Veterans Administration itself have begun to recognize the harm we do to people whom we send into war. They began to look at the moral and spiritual impact of war and came up with a new idea—the concept of *moral injury* to define the psychological, emotional and spiritual trauma that can result from having to make difficult moral choices under extreme conditions, witnessing immoral acts, or behaving in ways that challenge one’s conscience and identity. The amazing thing about this new concept is that it’s not just embraced by researchers and doctors; finally veterans are saying that it rings true for what they have really experienced.

This morning Patty Fox issued an extravagant welcome. She invoked Henry Nouwen to talk about the importance of welcome. As a denomination, we are built around this idea of extravagant welcome to all without exceptions. But what we need to remember on this morning as we read Elijah’s story, is that extending an extravagant welcome to veterans does not simply mean throwing that door open to let them in but rather offering with informed intention, a welcome of compassionate care and restorative healing. “It would mean a welcome that is cognizant of the wounds some carry as a result of their military service” one UCC pastor suggested. The miracle of Elijah is God’s beauty breaking forth through human agency. I encourage you and implore you—not just in this space, but in all the spaces of your life—to extend that kind of a welcome to the veterans whom we honor on this day.

You don’t need to be trained because you’re receiving the training of love in this very place. You don’t need to search for words; just lean back and find God’s words of love; you don’t need to have it all figured out. Instead, just like Elijah, bring your vulnerability to the moment. Bring the love of God—all we have practiced here. Bring the model of Jesus. Do what he did. Sit with them; honor them. Hear their story and trust that somehow in some way, just like that jar of meal—through simple togetherness—we will offer the miracle of *abiding astonishment*, the ongoing presence of the peace and love of Christ—that one that surpasses all human understanding. And friends, it will be enough. Amen.

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