

Dan Phillips: A Little Meal

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Elijah started the whole thing with his first prophesy. Elijah went to King Ahab, and told him that it would not rain in Israel until he, Elijah, said so. There will not even be dew on the ground, said Elijah. As prophecies go, it was a good one. It certainly got Ahab's attention. In that land, rain was directly tied to how well people prospered. Even a little drought could cause some people to go hungry. Hungry people have been known to rebel against their kings. Therefore, after prophesying, Elijah ran away. Considering what he had told the king, running probably was not a bad idea.

God directed Elijah to cross over the Jordan, and to go to a small creek called Cherith. Stay here, says God, and I will send birds to feed you, and you will have water from the creek. Therefore, Elijah settled down, and twice a day ravens brought him bread and meat. This is not as bad as I thought it would be, said Elijah. All I had to do was visit the king once, say my piece, and then I am taken care of. This is okay. I like this.

Eventually, of course, because there was no rain, the stream dried up. This took Elijah by surprise. If he had thought about it, he would not have been surprised. Aren't we often surprised when things work out exactly as we said they would? Elijah had thought that God would take care of all these little details. What was he to do now? How was he to live with no water?

As he prays, God speaks to him again. God commands Elijah to travel to the town of Zarapheth in Sidon. God promises Elijah that he will be provided for in Zarapheth. In fact, God says, She commanded a widow there to provide for Elijah.

I am sure that Elijah had the same questions that all of us would have: why did God dry up the stream? What was wrong with the status quo? Things had not been luxurious by the Cherith creek, but Elijah had survived. Why change things now? Most of us resist changes, especially ones we do not understand, and for which we see no purpose.

Why should God send him to a foreign country? Were there not people in Israel who would take care of Elijah? Why does God always seem to go out of Her way to make life tougher? Okay, maybe it was time for change, but why somewhere foreign, and strange?

Moreover, why send him to a widow? Widows were the poorest part of society, having no protector or provider. Given the social structure of that time, it was like telling someone today to go find a homeless person and ask him or her for a place to stay! Why not command a rich person to take care of Elijah?

Finally, why not just tell Elijah to speak the word and let it rain? That would take care of the creek. Why did he have to travel so much in this prophecy job?

However, after being fed and watered by the hand of God,

Elijah was willing to listen. He travels directly to Zarapheth. When he gets to the city gate, he sees a widow gathering sticks. He could tell she was a widow by how she was dressed. He thought to himself, this must be the one. So he began giving orders to her. "Bring me something to drink." When she obediently moves to do what he has said, he then says, "And bring me a little something to eat too." Elijah feared that maybe God would not do what She said, so he speaks more harshly than he should. Many of us are sharp and abrupt with others when we let our fears rule.

Now the widow had been willing to bring a drink to this arrogant stranger, but at the command to bring some food, the widow stops and turns to face Elijah. "I have nothing baked", she says. "I have only a little meal and a little oil, and I was gathering sticks to make a last meal for my son and myself. Then, we will lie down and die, for we have nothing else." Now her story is partially revealed. She is destitute, and she has given up. In her depression, she is preparing for the end of her life and the life of her only child. She has not argued with this demanding stranger, but now she has stated for him the facts of her life.

The widow probably expected Elijah to apologize now, or to make sympathetic sounds about her troubles. Instead, he reiterates his commands, but adds a promise. "Go bake something for me to eat" he says, "and God will make sure the meal and the oil does not run out." In fact, Elijah says "the meal and oil will not run out until it rains again." Given our weather, this was not much of a promise. However, knowing that it would not rain until he said so, Elijah is making a significant promise. He is saying that God will provide one way or the other. Either it will rain, in which case there will be plenty for all, or God will insure the oil and meal do

not run out.

Elijah makes this extravagant promise because he is now aware of the consequences of his prophecy. He has stopped the rain, and now many are suffering because of it. It was the right thing to do, but it is still hard on many that were innocent. It even affected people who were not in Israel.

Elijah also makes this wonderful promise because he has learned something from his recent experience. He has learned that God will provide. Moreover, he is willing to trust that the provision God has made for him will now be extended to the widow and her son. Therefore, he makes a promise that includes his new family.

Now it is the widow's decision. She had decided to die. She had prepared for death, not only for herself, but also for her son. She has worked all her life, and had nothing. She did not know this strange, arrogant, demanding stranger. She had not even met him 15 minutes earlier. Now, he was making extravagant promises about the future. She had heard that much before. Others promised her as much. After all of them left, she was here, with a small son, and nothing to eat, and no way to provide for herself.

After you have given up, it is hard to try again. After you have believed in things that did not happen, it is very hard to believe again. Her faith was extraordinary because this poor woman, this never-even-named widow who is ready to die, takes all she has and makes a meal for a man she does not know. How many of us could do that? How many of us have even been close to her situation? Hers was faith beyond even that of Elijah. She had to worry not just about herself, but also she had to worry about her son.

She did what Elijah told her to do, and it ended well. The oil and the meal held out, and she and her son had enough to live on for a long time. So, all was well.

God never leaves us alone! Suddenly, after some time, her son got sick. And he died. Our translation says that his illness was so severe he had no breath left in him. That is my definition of a severe illness. He died! Moreover, the widow, still unnamed, is angry. She is angry with God, but she takes it out on Elijah. She asks what Elijah has against her. Why had Elijah brought about the death of her son and reminded her of her sin?

Wait, where did that come from? What sin? Before this, there had been no suggestion that she was a sinful woman. Suddenly, in her question, the widow ties the death of her son to her own failures. We are not told, because we do not really need to know, what her sin was. Nevertheless, since we are very interested, we can speculate. Maybe the son was not her husband's. (We always look for the sexual scandal first.) On the other hand, maybe she is remembering her depression. Maybe she remembers when she gave up, and accepted that she and her son would die. Remembering this, maybe she feels guilty because her son now is dead, and she still lives.

In her anger, the widow blames Elijah for the death of her son. Moreover, Elijah accepts the blame! He had nothing to do with this, but now he takes the body of the child up to his room, and begins praying for a miracle. He also passes the blame on to God. Why, God, have you brought disaster to the place where I am? This family has done your will, and fed and

housed me. Now you kill the son. What kind of God are you? Please let this boy live.

Eventually, as he prays, he begins to realize that this whole event had been about the widow's faith, not his own. He has been a tool to bring about her survival and her faith development. However, this set of events was not about him. Sometimes when we are called to do God's work, we are acting in someone else's story. That is a hard fact, especially in our culture that teaches us to focus on our own journeys, physical and spiritual, and ourselves.

God answers the prayers of Elijah and the widow, and the never-named son lives. When Elijah takes the child back to his mother, the widow tells Elijah: Now I know God sent you, and that you speak the true words of God. It seems odd that this story about food and faith should end with a statement about truth. However, it is an awareness of truth, of the fact that faith leads to a better understanding of truth that is the end of this tale of the Widow of Zarephath.

So what are our truths? Where is our faith? We have prayed for prophecy in our community. Are we ready for its consequences, for us and for others? Have we understood that God's call to our faith is not always about us, it is often about others? Have we been able to answer God's call when we were in despair? When God has answered, have we recognized divine truth?

Our gospel reading today suggests that some truths are too hard, that we have to grow into these truths through the work

of the Holy Spirit. May we as a community keep praying as we grow into the truths of faith and love?