

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands – Rev. Cheryl Raine
Sunday, October 27, 2019

The First Reading is Psalm 146:1-10

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

² I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ **Do not put your trust in princes,**

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ **Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,**
whose hope is in the Lord their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord watches over the strangers;

he **upholds the orphan and the widow,**

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The Lord will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

The Second Reading is 1 Kings 17:8-16

(In worship this reading was presented as a melodrama by the Stars of Tomorrow Children's Theater Group)

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, ⁹ "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹² 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." ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ **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.** ¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ 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.

The Message is entitled, “Whom Do We Trust?”

In December of 2007, 6 Degree Fitness had its soft opening. It wasn't without some trials and tribulations though, as we were renovating the commercial space, the gym was vandalized and all the work tools were stolen. Undeterred the grand opening of the gym took place on January 1, 2008, to coincide with the phenomena of New Year's resolutions. Did you know that getting in shape physically is often high on resolution lists? So, my husband and I along with my sister and her husband became small business owners of a fitness gym with start up loans. Yet, little did we know that the subprime market in our country was in trouble and that by September of 2008, just nine months after our grand opening, there would be a worldwide financial crisis.

Looking back on our adventure of opening 6 Degree Fitness, it is nothing short of God's miraculous provision that the gym is still in business today and that our initial start up loans are paid off. That first year, I remember wondering, in light of the economic chaos, if we would even make the first full year, let alone be able to satisfy the personally guaranteed three-year lease. Miraculously though there was “new flour and new oil” every day as people signed up for membership and personal training amidst the 2008 financial crisis. God's miraculous provision... have you ever experienced it your life?

Now Elijah didn't face a financial crisis, but he faced a political one. Elijah was in the court of a king that did evil in the sight of the Lord. As a matter of fact, scripture records that “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.” First, Ahab married Jezebel who was from Sidon, a Phoenician seaport on the Mediterranean Sea. She wasn't an Israelite or a worshipper of God. So, enamored with his wife, Ahab worshipped her foreign god Baal and made a sacred pole to honor this god. Ahab put his trust in another god. So, Elijah, the Tishbite, was the bearer of a prophetic word, as he proclaimed God's judgment on this renegade king, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

God's provision for Elijah after his pronouncement to King Ahab was this, “Run and hide.” Ahab was steaming mad and Elijah's life was in danger, which is often the case for prophets because they called God's people and their leaders to turn back to God. It's just that God's people, especially those in leadership roles, don't often appreciate the rebuke. Instead, they deny their trust in the powers and principalities of alternate gods, whether Baal or stock markets, armies or treasuries.

And so, as we heard, Elijah ran and hid in the Wadi Cherith. His daily sustenance was water from the Wadi and food delivered by ravens, miraculous by all accounts. Eventually, though the Wadi dried up and it could no longer sustain Elijah. So, God's Plan B was this, “Go to Zarephath, where a widow will feed you.”

Now Elijah did just have ravens feed him daily, so I suppose it was not that much of a stretch to assume that a widow could feed him daily, too. Yet, widows struggle in the best of times, but even more so given that the drought was in full force. I am sure Elijah wondered how she would be able to provide for herself as well as for an extra mouth to feed.

The widow, as we learned, had almost nothing left. Only enough for a last meal for her and her son. Elijah's simple request, “Bring me a morsel of bread,” brings her story into full view. He receives an ear full from the widow about her plight, but even this doesn't dissuade Elijah from asking. He rallies his confidence in the One who helped him run and hide, the one who sustained him daily in the Wadi, for he said to the widow, “Do not be afraid... first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.”

Can't you just hear the widow scream silently in her mind, “Afterwards! Take care of you first? I barely have enough for the two of us!” I don't think any of us can really imagine what was going through the widow's mind. Yet, the text says she chose to trust the prophet who had interrupted her last meal. I do wonder if she really trusts that God will meet her in her place of desperation or if her decision to share with Elijah would just hastened the inevitable. What's clear in the text is that Elijah summoned his

trust in God's provision for he boldly proclaimed, "The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail."

The widow's desperation and Elijah's trust meet. Yes, desperation and trust meet in Zarephath. Commentator James Hopkins writes, "Rufus Watson loved this story. Rufus was born in Texas, the son of former slaves. During his lifetime, which spanned 99 years, he served his country in the military, he pitched in the Negro professional leagues and he made some money in real estate." Rufus found comfort in this story saying, "if his life was not proof enough, then this story showed that God meets people at the bottom of the barrel. God meets us," says Rufus, "when we've gone so low that all we can do is look up."

Both, Elijah and the widow and her son, are so low they can only look up. I wonder if we will trust God when we find ourselves in a place like this. When we realize that we do not have the resources to sustain ourselves.

November 9, 2016, was such a place for me. It's the day when I met with my breast cancer surgeon and learned her recommended course of action based on my diagnosis. I was so low that day that all I could do was look up and when I did, what I experienced was a communion of saints like Elijah, whose trust in God infused me with hope. I knew that God's provision in the midst of my health crisis would be enough, even though this was not exactly how I had planned to spend the seven weeks I scheduled off between my two pastoral calls. My "jar of meal and jug of oil" though did not run dry; as a matter of fact, the daily sustenance I received through the miraculous feeding by others was more than I could have asked for or imagined.

Do you remember what the psalmist said to us this morning, "Do not put your trust in princes?" That is do not put your trust in any power or principality of this world, for in these there is no help. They will always disappoint. Instead the psalmist declares that hope and happiness will find us when we place our trust in God, the one who keeps faith forever. If we will only trust that God is with us and can see us through whatever befalls us.

The question arising from Elijah and the widow of Zarephath's story this morning is this: Whom do we trust? Whom do we trust individually and whom do we trust communally as a church? Whom do we trust not only when desperation sets in, but each and every day?

I remember a pastor from Zimbabwe saying to a mission group from America, "In Africa we depend on God." Elijah and the widow depended on God. Without God's miraculous provision their stories would not have been told. Elijah would have died in the desert and the widow and her son would have died from starvation. They didn't have what they needed to sustain life, so they had to depend on God.

The pastor from Zimbabwe prefaced his comment about Africa, with this comment, "In America you believe in God." That is, he said, "In America you believe in God. In Africa we depend on God." It seems me that the pastor was being a bit like Elijah. Believing in God is one thing, but putting that belief into action is another. Elijah believed in God's provision, but then he acted boldly saying to the widow, "The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail." Do we boldly act on what we believe to be true about God? Do we boldly act on the belief that with God all things are possible, even daily sustenance delivered by ravens and a jar of meal and a jug of oil that miraculously fill each night?

Whom do we trust with our very lives? May we trust in God's provision for our lives when we are so low that all we can do is look up as well as when our lives are overfull with bounty and goodness. Amen.