

The Widow of Zarephath: Learning to Trust in the Provision of God

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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I Kings 17:8-24

Today our summer sermon series on Women of the Bible concludes with a look at the story of the Widow of Zarephath. This woman was not an Israelite but rather lived in the region of the Sidonians on the coast of modern day Lebanon. She feeds the prophet Elijah and allows him to stay with her and her son during a period of prolonged drought. In the passage before the one I'm about to read, Elijah appears out of nowhere and announces to King Ahab of Israel that there will be a years-long drought, the implication being that this is a consequence of the unfaithfulness of the king and his people. Elijah then hides out from Ahab near a creek east of the Jordan River and there ravens bring him bread and meat day and night, until the creek dries up completely. That's when God sends Elijah to the widow of Zarephath. Listen now to how they interact—and for what we can learn from this widow.

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.

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. She 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!' But 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. He 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?' Then 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.' The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah 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.' So 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.'

Looking at the images of flooded neighborhoods in and around Houston throughout this week brings us face-to-face with just how much damage nine trillion gallons of water in a cube four miles square and two miles high can do when it falls on a city over several days. **Too much rain** is not a good thing, as the people who lost loved ones and property in Hurricane Harvey's deluge can attest. **Too much rain** leads to rivers and creeks overflowing and waters continuing to rise even after waters have

come over those rivers' banks. **Too much rain** leads to houses being inundated and destroyed and people being swept away and sometimes drowned in currents.

The ancient Hebrews, like other primitive cultures, knew about the dangers of too much water. So they told stories about Noah and his ark, and they sang psalms about God's reigning enthroned over the flood and God's voice thundering over the waters. Later they were comforted by the words of Isaiah, centuries after God had led through the sea in escaping Egypt, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you."

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a Methodist pastor colleague of mine, wrote a wonderful poem this week in the aftermath of the flooding in Houston and elsewhere in Texas. He prefaces his poem by quoting that bit of Isaiah 43:

*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and through the rivers,
they shall not overwhelm you
For I am the Holy One your God,
and I love you.
—Isaiah 43.2,4*

Then he writes:

*In the flood that is this life
some waters will sweep your home away
and others stop at your doorstep.
There is no choosing, no deserving
in their rising or receding.
On any given day one of us is picnicking,
another swimming for our lives.
For all of us some day waters will rise,
and with them,
beside us in the water a reaching out,
above the swirling flood a reaching out.
So many reaching out.
This is what we have to stand on.¹*

That is what we—and our fellow children of God in Houston and the Gulf Coast and in South Asia and in Nigeria—have to stand on. *Above the swirling flood, there is a reaching out. So many reaching out.*

What I love about that poem is that it emphasizes that the waters will rise for all of us some day. If not literally, then metaphorically. All of us will face a time—we face times—when life's circumstances feel like a flood that threatens to overwhelm us. You know about those times. The death of someone near and dear to you, financial calamity, depression, addiction... So many things can threaten to overwhelm us. Maybe you know what that's like right now. Or maybe you're

¹ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Flood", *Unfolding Light*,
<https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/93xgtd2t9r5g6hyl5b7nh997cml2lk>, 30 Aug 2017

picnicking now. But one day, sure enough, we will be swimming for our lives—and we'll need somebody to reach out to us.

The problem in today's passage about the Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath is not **too much rain**, of course, it is **not enough** rain. Not enough water can be just as disastrous as too much. You can ask the people of Sudan about that.

By the time Elijah and the widow meet each other, it has not rained for a very long time. The land of Israel and its surrounding areas are in the middle of a drought, and when such ecological crises occur, it is often the poorest people who are the most vulnerable to their effects. They live hand to mouth, and the little bit that they can manage to store away can dry up quickly. Such might have been the case with the widow of Zarephath. So when Elijah shows up at her doorstep, the widow is about to run out of food completely. She's getting ready to take the last little bit of flour and the last measure of oil she has left to make a little bread for herself and her son before they both die. Whatever resources she had are about to run out and she is ready to give up.

Then this prophet, this man of God, shows up and sees her gathering sticks and says, "Bring me some water and bring me some bread!" The first miracle in this story is that she doesn't sock Elijah right in the mouth! She responds, "I don't have anything baked, just a little flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug that I'm getting ready to cook up for a last meal for my boy and myself." But Elijah says to her, "Fear not!"

Just a side note: Isn't it amazing how often "Do not be afraid" pops up in the Bible? Someone says it occurs 365 times. I haven't really checked that out. But I'd like to believe that is true. Once for every day of the year. There's probably another one to throw in for the leap year. Elijah tells her to fear not, but to go ahead and use up the last of what she has for a meal, then bring him something to eat first and then she can eat afterward. She does as Elijah says—and from that point on until it finally rained in Israel, the flour in her jar and oil in her jug didn't run out. It's quite a miracle story.

It's amazing what can happen, in the midst of crisis and hardship, when people take what little they feel like they possess in terms of material, emotional, or spiritual resources and give it over to the work of love and welcome.

One of the things that makes the story of the widow of Zarephath remarkable—and why Jesus refers to it in his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, a sermon that gets him thrown out of town—is that the woman who does this is not an Israelite. She's from the land of Tyre and Sidon. She's a Gentile. She worships a different God than the Israelites, if she worships at all. And at the point where the widow is ready to give up and die, she takes all that she has left and uses it to care for an outsider as well as herself. She puts what little she has in the service of a God of love and she finds that what she has doesn't run out. It keeps getting replenished somehow.

I've been marveling at the stories that have come out of Houston this week. I know you've read or watched some of them. In the middle of such epic devastation and loss, we've heard and seen such wonderful things. Lives have been lost yes, property has been destroyed yes, but the story of the jar of meal and jug of oil keeps playing out in front of us.

People from various religious traditions or none at all, people from different social classes, people with different political perspectives all coming together to provide help to their neighbors in need.

One of my favorite stories happened in storm shelter in Rockport, Texas.

When the emergency authorities pulled in last Saturday, they asked, "Who's in charge here?" And everybody pointed to Zachary Dearing, a 29 year old man wearing shorts, an olive-green T-shirt and curly blond hair pulled into a man-bun. He didn't look the part, but he seemed to have keen command of a desperate situation playing out in his beach community of about 10,000 people, a tiny town which took catastrophic damage from a direct hit by Hurricane Harvey.

Dearing rattled off basic facts and needs: The shelter had 126 people at last headcount. Six were medically fragile. Four needed oxygen. Two needed hospice care. Everyone was calm because they had just been fed, he said.

A person with the Texas Emergency Medical Task Force asked him, "What service are you with?"

She was shocked to learn that Zachary Dearing—a descendant of the widow of Zarephath—was a civilian with no medical expertise. He was a screenwriter had moved to Rockport from Lexington, Kentucky only three months before to live with his father, a cancer survivor, on a house boat.

Though they had set up a shelter, officials provided no supplies or management for vulnerable citizens unwilling or unable to evacuate, according to Dearing, others at the shelter and three Texas emergency management officials who later took over Saturday's rescue effort there.

Did you get that? They had no resources! None, no supplies, no leadership stocked in that shelter. But they had Zachary Dearing and his jar of flour and jug of oil.

But Dearing stepped in. He recruited volunteers—mostly between the ages of 16 and 21—(Did you get that Anna Marie and Sean?) and he put them on shifts checking on everybody inside. He got people to pool their food and water so that all could be fed. He had the team plug leaks from the driving rain. And he organized trips into the wind storm to rescue more stranded people.

The article I read about Dearing says, "The episode underscores how natural disasters can often overwhelm official efforts to plan and staff for the worst - in this case, a small South Texas city getting smacked with its worst storm in 47 years. Dearing's unlikely role at the shelter also highlights how volunteers often band together in the face of danger and to provide one another aid, comfort and life-saving care.

He became a one-man army running a triage hospital with nothing."

Just one guy, giving what little he had in the midst of an enormous natural disaster and somehow it was enough.

Finally, late Saturday, after he turned the work over to the emergency management officials who'd finally arrived, buses arrived to carry people to shelters in Austin.

Watching the buses load Saturday evening, Dearing was elated that everyone at the shelter was finally getting what they needed.

He had broken into tears when it became clear that a collection of state law enforcement and emergency professionals had the solutions for the many problems he had been juggling.

*"No one got hurt; the patients are alive," he said. "These guys answered my prayers, and I cried."*²

The jar of meal and the jug of oil didn't run out! I don't know what kind of religious tradition Dearing comes from and it doesn't matter. What matters is that like the widow of Zarephath, Zachary took what he had and put it in the service of compassionate service to others, and it was enough, until help arrived.

Then there was the story of the Mexican bakers. Did you catch their story? They were trapped in their bakery for two days in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and there they made hundreds of loaves of bread to give to flood victims.

The workers were from the El Bolillo Bakery in Houston. They took nearly 2,000 kilograms of flour to bake bread and pan dulce, Mexican sweet bread, throughout the night and the day after they were left stranded by the floods over the weekend.

The four bakers had been working on a late shift when they realized they could not leave the shop because of the level of water on the streets.

*To take their minds off worrying about their family and friends, they decided to continue to bake for those affected by the devastating downpours.*³

Did you see the picture of them delivering bread to the Mattress King? Surely you heard about how he decided that he was going to let people come in and sleep on the mattresses in his store because they needed shelter and rest.

I thought too of the image I saw of an African-American pastor peering down into a submerged car. He wouldn't leave the area until he had checked every submerged car to make sure that there wasn't anyone in there who needed to be rescued.

So many people following in the footsteps of the widow of Zarephath. So many stories of people finding that when resources were dwindling, somehow they had enough energy, enough hope to care for others.

Then there were the ones who died in the process of helping or otherwise. Sometimes that happens, too, right? Sometimes people die. That is part of the story of widow of Zarephath, too. Her son dies. The breath goes out of him. Thanks to Elijah, she gets to experience what the rest of us don't, her son is brought back to life in the flesh right then. People whose family members died in the hurricane get the hope of resurrection, too. Though it doesn't come in quite the same way, they get the promise that God will provide even in the midst of loss and that death won't get the last word.

Speaking of God providing, it's been an interesting week around here. We've been moving towards our project of being an emergency hypothermia shelter through Facets for up to 40 people in the week before Christmas. We're taking care of details along the way. Everything has been moving

² Brian Thevenot, "An unlikely hurricane hero takes over chaotic Texas storm shelter", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-storm-harvey-shelter-hero/an-unlikely-hurricane-hero-takes-over-chaotic-texas-storm-shelter-idUSKCN1B70UN>, 27 Aug 2017

• ³ Chloe Farand, "A group of Mexican bakers trapped by Harvey made 2 tonnes of bread for hurricane victims", *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trapped-mexican-bakers-make-tonnes-of-bread-for-harvey-victims-2017-8>, 31 Aug 2017

along fine, but occasionally there's a hiccup or a new wrinkle. We went through one of those this week that is resolving itself nicely.

Pastor Katie told me that she asked somebody at Facets this week what the people who will be our guests that week most need, what we can do to give them something special. This person told her that what they'll really need, what they need more than anything else, is socks. It makes sense. You have to protect your feet, right?

Katie found an organization called The Joy of Sox which is dedicated to getting socks to people who are especially vulnerable to the elements. She called them up and said, "We have a need. We want to provide the guests who will be staying with us in the week before Christmas with socks."

She received word back from them that they will be sending us free of charge 140 pairs of men's socks and 120 pairs of women's socks—everything they can fit in one giant box. They are sending them to us for free because what they look for is people who want to be sock angels.

Fear not. Fear not. Always remember that when we take our resources—the little bit of flour, the little bit of oil, the little bit of time and energy that we have—and put them in the service of God—the service of love—it will never run out. As long as keep bringing them to God in prayer, they will never run out.

In Jesus' name. Amen.