

Sermon for June 5, 2016
"The Widow of Zarephath's Faith"

1 Kings 17:8-24

There is a point when one comprehends the finality of events. A point at which there is nothing else to do but embrace the finality of the situation. The point at which you realize that the light you see ahead is not the end of the tunnel but an oncoming train. At that point there is nothing to do but surrender oneself to the inevitable. In that moment of surrender, there is peace. There is at first not regret or fear or blame; just "Oh, this is what is going to happen, so be it."

Let me tell you what I mean. One day as a teenager I was driving a friend somewhere and we were stopped at a traffic light in the left turn lane. We had just had one of those short spring showers. The sun was bright and the steam was rising off the pavement. A car turned onto the street we were stopped at coming in our direction and we could tell right away that something was wrong. The car started to fishtail. I could tell that the driver was not going to get the car under control because with each correction the swerving got worse. They were either going to run into the ditch or into one of the cars. Finally I realized that of the 8 or ten cars lined up it was going to hit me. There was a car in front of me and one behind and another to the right. No time to brace myself or to plan. I just realized this car is going to hit us and all I could do was embrace the inevitability of the event. By the way no one was hurt.

I tell this story because this point of surrendering to the inevitable finality of events is where the widow of Zarephath was. She had come to the realization that she and her son were going to die. And she simply embraced the inevitability of her death and her son's death.

To understand this we need to back up and tell of the events that led up to this. The story starts when a new king came to the throne in Israel. This new king's wife, Jezebel, promoted the worship of the false god Baal in Israel, and the king also practiced child sacrifice among other things. God told Elijah the prophet that the time had come for him the head for the hills. But before he left, Elijah gave one more prophesy from the Lord. He said, "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."

Then God led Elijah to a ravine in the wilderness where there was still some water. And God sent the ravens to bring food to Elijah so that he would have enough to eat. Then the water dried up.

But when the drought hit Israel it also affected the Gentiles living on the edges of Israel. So God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow in Zarephath and her son. Like a true child of God, this widow shows hospitality and gives Elijah some water. Then he asks for some food and she says, "I was just going to prepare the last of our food so we could eat it and then starve to death."

It was at this point of surrender to the inevitable finality that God acts. Elijah tells her to fix him some food and then to fix some for herself and for her son. She fed the prophet and her son and by a miracle of God the meal did not run out. The containers refilled themselves so that they would have something to eat.

But that was not the end of the story. The woman's son became ill and died. Couldn't the God of the prophet who had multiplied the meal and the oil have kept her son, her life, from dying? So Elijah takes the boy and prays to God.

And the widow's son is raised from the dead. When he gave the widow her son back, she praises God. The Widow of Zarephath, a Gentile, glorifies God! She had surrendered herself to the inevitable and put her faith in God and God cared for her. Elijah had surrendered himself to the inevitable and trusted God and God cared for him.

In case you haven't heard what this passage is saying, let me illuminate it historically and critically. The form of this story is that of story of a hero in Israel. Elijah was a well known character who performed many acts of righteousness and justice in Israel. But he is not in Israel in this story. The other character is a Gentile widow. But she is not a stereotype. She is open to Elijah's God and at the same time hesitant.

This story was told at a particular time for a particular reason. Bible scholars believe that the stories of the 1 & 2 Kings were redacted into their present form during the exile. Imagine you are one of those exiles. You have seen Jerusalem and the temple destroyed and you are being carried off in chains. Your captors have ridiculed your religion and required of you to sing one of the songs of Zion. You have sworn you will never take up the lyre to sing those songs again.

Then one of your religion elders sits down and tells you a story about Elijah. Elijah who called down fire from heaven. Perhaps God will rain down fire on our captors. But wait. In this story Elijah is not in Israel. Elijah has been driven into exile. And right there is a Gentile, but this Gentile does not ridicule Elijah. She offers him water and is receptive to God.

If God was with Elijah in his exile maybe God is with us in our exile. If the Widow of Zarephath was receptive to God perhaps some of these people will be too. Even though we have seen Zion destroyed, perhaps there is hope just as there was hope for the Widow and for Elijah and for the Widow's son.

One popular song says, "I did my best to notice When the call came down the line. Up to the platform of surrender I was brought but I was kind, and sometimes I get nervous When I see an open door Close your eyes, Clear your heart ... Cut the cord."¹

There are times in life when things seem to be coming to an end. Things are lost. Family members die. Illness strikes.

The call comes down the line and we are taken to the platform of surrender. When that happens, close your eyes and clear your heart. Let God be God. Trust that your Creator knows best and will care for you.

Jesus is the best example of that. He saw the oncoming train of the political and religious institutions of his day. He comprehended the finality of his last days. He embraced and surrendered to the finality of what was about to happen. And then said "This is my body broken for you." "This is my blood shed for you."

When the unthinkable becomes the inevitable, when you see the light of the oncoming train of life, when you comprehend the finality of events - of life, take a lesson from the widow of Zarephath and Elijah and Jesus.

At such times, surrender yourself to God. The great theologian Schleiermacher said "The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence."² When everything else in your life is falling apart, you can depend on God. Fall into the arms of the Almighty's care. God fed Elijah and the widow and her son. God raised the widow's son from the dead. God raised Jesus to eternal life. And God will raise you up too.

¹"Human" by "The Killers" Flowers, Brandon; Keuning, Dave Brent; Stoermer, Mark August; Vannucci, Ronnie Jr.

² On Religion, p. 106