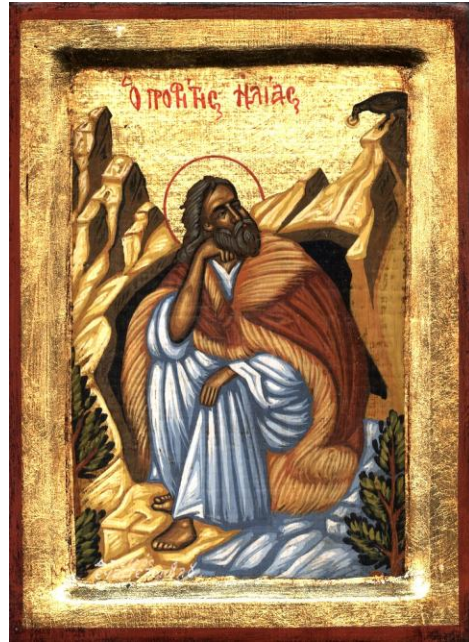


Sunday, 5 June 2016

Elijah and the widow



[1 Kings 17:8-16](#)

A couple of years ago when we were living in Edmonton, Crystal saw a few crows in our back yard playing with some pink paper. When the crows flew away she went to look at what they brought into our backyard. To her surprise it was a 50 dollar bill!

I always think of the prophet Elijah when I think of that moment. As you might remember, when Elijah was hiding from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel Ravens brought him food in the wilderness. It's one of those stories that seems to have the ring of legend and can cause you to doubt its historical reality, but I believe it wholeheartedly now.

Elijah was hiding in the wilderness because God had sent him to deliver a message to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They had started a quite aggressive and violent program to introduce the worship of a different god- Baal- a god from the queen's homeland. This particular god was believed to be a storm god that controlled the rain, among other things. So when Elijah declared God's message that no rain would fall and the land would suffer from a drought, that was a direct challenge to this supposed "god of rain". It was a declaration that The God of Israel- YHWH- is the one that ultimately controls the rain. This challenge was obviously not appreciated and Elijah had to go into hiding. While he was in hiding he was fed by the ravens. He was camping out by a little creek in the wilderness, but when it dried up God tells Elijah, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." The widow doesn't seem to be aware of the command.

It is interesting to think about Elijah and this widow. Elijah has been on the run and living in the wilderness. He's a bit of a Wildman. ... When God sends him to someone to give him water and food, God doesn't send him to some rich man with deep cisterns of water to last through droughts, and large granaries full of food. God sends him to a widow living in Queen Jezebel's homeland. ... A widow was one of the most vulnerable people. They were easily abused. In that culture it was important to have a man to protect you and to give you a voice in the broader society. For example, it would be next to impossible to have a voice in the legal system without a man representing you. Without a husband, or some other man looking out for her, she was incredibly vulnerable. Living as a

widow almost always meant being thrust into poverty. She would have been easily taken advantage of. ... Her son would have been her only real hope for the future. He would care for her when she was too old to care for him. ...Of all the people God could send Elijah to, He sends him to this poor widow.

One way to read the Bible is to see yourself in the various characters. So you might read this passage and see yourself as Elijah. There are a few lessons we might learn by doing this. One, is that just because we follow God's will we are not guaranteed to have easy lives. It is a common mistake to think that because we go to church and give of our money and offer our services to the church that things should go well for us. We won't get sick. Those we love won't endure tragedy.

Unfortunately, it's not true. We look at Jesus and the disciples and we would not say they had easy and comfortable lives. Paul describes his life as a Christian in one of his letters, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:24-28).

With the example of Paul, Jesus, his disciples, and other servants of God, like Elijah, we should be careful not to expect

our lives to be easy just because we are doing what we should be doing. Neither should we expect that we are somehow out of the will of God just because we endure some suffering.

Another lesson to be gleaned would be that you never know where help might come from. God provides for us in surprising ways. If we were calling the shots, we would send Elijah to a rich man, but God sends Elijah to a poor widow. In Isaiah 55:8 God says,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways”.

God acts in ways that are unexpected. God saved the world through the death of Jesus, the Son of God, and the son of a carpenter. The cross was God’s self-sacrifice to show His love to humanity. Jesus chose a ragtag group of disciples from fishermen and tax-collectors and changed the world with them. ... God chose, of all people, a group of slaves and fought for them against Pharaoh and one of the strongest nations on the earth at the time- Egypt. ... God behaves in ways that we don’t expect. And, at times, God provides for us in ways we don’t expect and that might not even make sense. Most of us wouldn’t have the guts to ask for help from a poor widow. And yet, that is where Elijah is sent. God might give us help from somewhere we least expect it.

We might also imagine ourselves as the widow. A lesson we might glean is that God will sometimes ask of us at a time when we feel like we are least able to help. He might ask something of us when we feel physically weak, emotionally broken, financially poor, and spiritually empty. But, God will not ask anything of us without also giving us a way to fulfill it. God asks

the poor widow to feed the wildman-prophet Elijah. Elijah asks her for bread and she says,
“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” (17:12).

This is who Elijah is sent to. A widow that is cooking her last meal. And yet, Elijah asking her for help is really the means of salvation for her and her son. Elijah says 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” (17:13-15).

If Elijah hadn't asked her for help, she and her son would have died. So God may ask us to do something when we are weak- physically, emotionally, financially, or spiritually- but God asking something of us might actually be the means by which we are saved and made strong. Sometimes we think God is asking too much of us, when really it is the means God is using to heal us. God asked a widow with no food to feed a stranger and because of it she was provided with an abundance of food. God has a tendency to use those the world sees as weak and poor to show his strength and abundance.

Think about Mary. She was a common girl. Young and not married, and God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. Think of

David, the youngest of his brothers, a shepherd, he takes down the giant Goliath and God makes him into a great king. This story is repeated over and over throughout the history of God's people. As Paul says in 1 Cor 1:27, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong".

To sum up a few of the lessons we can learn from this passage, as we see ourselves as Elijah we are not guaranteed to live lives free of trouble and suffering just because we are living in God's will. The opposite might even be true- we might suffer because we are following God's will. We also should expect the unexpected in terms of how God is going to help us. Help will come from unexpected places- like food from a starving widow. As the widow we learn that God may ask things of us when we feel too weak to obey. God may ask us when we feel physically weak, emotionally broken, financially poor, and spiritually empty, but our obedience to God when we are weak might actually be how we are made strong. So may our eyes be opened to see the world as God sees it, and may we be willing to be uncomfortable and expect the unexpected as we follow God.