

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Andy Cooke
Sunday, November 7, 2021

1 Kings 17:8-16

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.

We knew that the road where Jesus had walked was not far, but we couldn't find it. There were no signs to guide us, no well-worn path to follow. There we only had a map and a guidebook and the hope that somewhere over that freeway and across the pasture was that ancient road where Jesus had once walked.

Several years ago, David and I took a trip to Galilee to hike the Jesus trail which begins in Nazareth and ends in Capernaum at the Sea of Galilee. There are many opportunities for religious tourists in that part of the world, but this seemed like the best way to do it. That's what

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we thought. Stay close to the land, get to know the people, walk everywhere just like Jesus did in John's gospel. It took one verse, one verse to go from Cana to Capernaum after a wedding as if it were just the next town over. It took us three days to make that same journey on foot, three long exhausting hot days in June. Since that time, I read everything in the Bible a little differently. I'm always interested to know how far apart these places are from each other, and what the geography is like. I never let my mind skip from place to place anymore, ignoring the miles and the mountains and the rivers between the verses. The Bible is one big journey after another, and understanding the distances and geography brings it to life in a new way. Take our reading from First Kings this morning. We don't know exactly where Elijah was when he was hiding from King Ahab. He was in his homeland, though, somewhere east of the river Jordan. He might have been hungry and thirsty and scared for his life, but at least he was home. And then God tells him to do this unbelievable thing. God tells him to go north into Sidon, the land of Baal and Jezebel, the place where all this trouble started, the place that caused him to become a prophet and a wanted man. God tells this tired, thirsty prophet to walk 60 or 70 miles into enemy territory where a widow of a poor starving widow will feed him, and incredibly Elijah goes. With all due respect to Elijah, I think I would have taken a page out of Jonah's book, and sat down on the ground in protest, and asked God to just let me die. But that's not what Elijah does. He follows God's instructions, and he takes this long journey to Zarephath, where he finds a widow gathering sticks. They were both in difficult situations. She was preparing her last meal before her death, and he had just walked 60 or 70 miles with nothing to eat or drink. When you think about it, this bad situation was all God's doing, and it looked very much like it would not end well.

One of the most underappreciated moments in the gospels, at least in my estimation, is in the 10th chapter of Matthew when Jesus sends the 12 out with instructions to take no money, no bag, no extra clothes, no sandals, and no staff. He says whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there. He sends these disciples out and puts them in a position where they must rely on the compassion and generosity of others. I don't think we followed this example very well in the church today. We spend plenty of time talking about how to give well, but not so much time talking about how to receive well. The act of receiving something

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well is a blessing to the giver but learning to receive also helps us to throw off the illusions of independence and self-sufficiency that we seem to value so much in some ways. The practice of receiving saves us from the idolatry of self and opens us to receive God's grace.

By the time that Elijah arrived in Zarephath, any illusion of self-sufficiency was certainly gone. Not only that, he might have even felt foolish as he walked up to that town gate. He might have felt like he was taking advantage of this poor widow.

He might have felt selfish, but he persisted. He persisted with what God had called him to do, and he told this widow that God would provide for them. And by the grace of God, she trusted this wild, stinky prophet who was standing right there in front of her saying these unbelievable things, and she was generous with him. This story shows that our strength comes not in an abundance of resources, but in our willingness to share with others. When people are willing to give, then God gives through them. Our generosity becomes a channel for god's generosity.

Today as we gather here for worship, we are installing David Powers as the pastor of this congregation, and when I read this story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in the weekly lectionary, it seemed perfect for the occasion. David probably smells better than Elijah did, and this congregation certainly has more wealth than the widow at Zarephath, but David has left his former home and come a long way to serve among you, and you have certainly experienced hardship and uncertainty in your years of ministry together in this place. God is calling both of you to need the other so that God can work through you both, but it is a hard thing to learn to trust another. The only way forward is to remember that God has put you together, and somehow God is making you rely on each other. Now in the midst of what looked to be an awful situation, God's message to Elijah and the widow was that the jar of meal would not be emptied, and the jug of oil would not fail. It may have been impossible to believe, but that was God's word to these starving souls that day. I can almost hear their prayers spoken silently in their heads. How is it, O God, that this is the path that you have put us on? Give us the grace to trust that you will provide for us through each other. Give us the patience to trust your promises even when they seem far-fetched help us.

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Help us to see your way.

It was Sunday, June 7th.

My journal says that we walked nearly 13 miles that day as we journeyed from Cana to Galilee in that place where they had that infamous wedding, all the way to a place called Kibbutz Lobby. We knew that the road where Jesus had walked was not far, but we couldn't find it. There were no signs to guide us, no well-worn path to follow there. We only had a map, and a guidebook, and the hope that somewhere over this freeway and across a pasture was that ancient road where Jesus had once walked. Our guidebook said that if we crossed the freeway, about a hundred meters past the McDonald's, and then went up onto a ridge, that we would find the remains of this ancient Roman road that linked the cities of Acre and Tiberius. It said Jesus likely used this road on his journey from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee, and it was a major east-west thoroughfare during his time.

We waited for a break in the traffic and ran across the highway before jumping a fence into a cow pasture. Are we trespassing? I wonder what an Israeli jail is like.

As we made our way through the pasture, we came upon a dead cow that seemed to have been there for a while. Certainly, we are in the wrong place.

All of the other holy sites in the area have parking lots and tour buses and these gaudy souvenir shops. All of the other holy sites are questionable too, more traditional than historical fact, but this was different. Jesus almost certainly walked this road. How is it that no one seems to care? Are we in the right place?

When we found the road, it was unmistakable. It had grass growing up between the stones, but it was unmistakable. I remember walking on it and feeling a sense of connection to Jesus and the disciples who probably walked in this very place two thousand years ago when the road was new. The way looked different now, but it was still the way.

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The path is never what we would expect. In fact, we can probably tell that we are on the right path when it does not fit our expectations when we doubt that we can go on when we could not imagine how we will not be emptied.

It is here that we are on the right path, that we throw off the illusions of self-reliance, here that we learn to trust that God will work through another to provide for us in our time of need.

Thanks be to God for the promises that are never emptied, and for the people in our lives that are vessels of God's grace. In the name of God, the father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.