

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, November 3, 2024

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Friends, as we continue in our worship this day and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to join me in a word of prayer. Let's pray together.

Eternal Love, Eternal Grace, Eternal Hope, greet us in this time with your peace. Greet us in this time with your compassion. Greet us in this time with a word. Quiet us that we might hear it, and give us courage that we might respond. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

We continue this morning in our Narrative Lectionary journey. We've moved from a little bit earlier in First Kings to First Kings, chapter 17: 8-16, so you can follow along in your Pew Bible or the Bible that you brought with you this morning as we listen to a story that you're perhaps familiar with about the Widow of Zarephath.

Beginning in verse 8-

*Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, 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 afterward 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.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So some stories are cut and dried. We can tell from the way the story begins what the conclusion is going to be. This is one of those stories this morning. It's a story that from the beginning we know what is supposed to happen, that is until we don't. I've told this story before, but when I was 13 I wanted a dog, and my father had a way of figuring out whether I was going to care for a pet well or not. He took myself, he took me and my sister to the Anderson Jockey Lot. Y'all don't know what the Anderson Jockey Lot is, but in South Carolina back where I'm from, there are flea markets on the side of most every four-lane highway across the state; and in Anderson, South Carolina, there is this collection of metal buildings that are put together, and you can go there, and if you need an airbrush license plate, it is your place, all right? If you need a pocket knife of any kind, it is your place. If you want to trade baseball cards, it is your place. There's all sorts of stuff that you can get at the Anderson Jockey Lot. And so my father put me and my sister in the

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car on a Saturday morning and said, "If you want a dog, come with me. We're going to the Anderson Jockey Lot." And we were very excited. So we go to the Anderson Jockey Lot, and we walk right through the main hallway, and there's a bunch of little puppies in one of those makeshift little fences, right? And we walked right on past them, and we made our way down to the end of one of the rows, and he turned and he said, "Here you go." And there were these little silver dollar turtles, okay, and he said, "Here, I'll make a deal with you. If you can care for and take care of these little silver dollar turtles, then I will get you a dog." And he talked with the dealer of these turtles—very interesting business that this guy was running—and we took home two turtles, and we named them that day. We had a ceremony, and we named one Smokey and one Dribble. Okay, I was into basketball and a very simple guy, so Dribble was mine. Smokey was my sister's. They lived in what we might describe as a tropical plastic paradise in my sister's room. She insisted that they live in her room. And so we'd go in there every day. We'd clean out the water. We'd put a little bit of turtle food in there for them; and day after day, week after week, month after month, we took care of these turtles. They would greet us, slow as they were, every morning, happy that we were there. One morning Smokey didn't greet us like he normally did. We thought he was just sleeping. It was about nine months after we had made the trip to the Anderson Jockey Lot. We found out later that he wasn't just slow. He had passed away. A couple of days later Dribble, we like to remember, died of a broken heart. And then we took Smokey and Dribble, and I attended my first funeral at 203 Firethorn Drive in Greer, South Carolina. Right outside of our...outside of our driveway...to the side of our driveway I should say, we dug a little hole in a little pansy bed that my mom had, and we laid them to rest in the ground. We were sad, but we knew we had accomplished something. We had kept those turtles alive. So we went inside, and we sat down for a meal. There weren't bacon sandwiches there like after we have a funeral here, right. We sat down, and we said, "We cannot wait to pick out our dog. We have shown you that we can care for living things, and now it is time." And he said, "I'm really sorry. The turtle dealer promised me they would die after 2 weeks." They were not supposed to live for 9 months, right. My dad thought he knew what the end of the story was going to be. It was going to be that they would die after two weeks without any reason. We would have even taken good care of them, and he could have said to us, "I'm sorry you didn't do a good job here." Except for—they were around, right? He knew how the story was supposed to end. And in a much deeper, more meaningful way, in the story that we read this morning we know the ending from the beginning. Death is the foregone conclusion. The supplies have run out. You can imagine the widow over the last several weeks and months watching that jar of meal and that jug of oil every time she went back to the jar of meal. It—just sitting there on the shelf—became less and less and less; and every time she picked up that jug of oil it became lighter and lighter in her hand, until this morning when she realized there was nothing but dust left in the jar and only the real faint remembrance of oil in the jug. And she figures out that morning that it's time. So she goes and she begins to collect sticks to create a fire and take small morsels of what remains in those containers and put them together to make a meal. You could call it a last supper for her and her son. She is, you might imagine, afraid. She has to be sad. She has to be famished, not just physically but also spiritually, emotionally. She's been watching this coming from a mile away, and there was nothing she could do about it, so she imagined that morning that she was at the end of her story.

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But it turns out that God had other plans. Her end was not God's end. And so that morning as she's collecting sticks, Elijah shows up. It's one of the first times we see Elijah. This man comes upon her and says, "Get me some water." She doesn't ask many questions. Water is in ample enough supply. "I'll go get this stranger some water," and she begins to make her way to the water source. And then he says, "Oh, and bring me something to eat too." And that's the final straw for her. She whips around and she says, "I don't have anything to give you. I'm out. You see the sticks I'm holding? These are for a fire for the little bit of meal I have left and the tiny bit of oil. We're making a final meal, me and my son, and then we're going to die." And then Elijah speaks God's promise to her, but he doesn't say it straight out. He says, "Go and do what you've said you need to do, but make me a meal first. I promise you the supplies you have are not going to give out. I know you've been watching them. I know you've been seeing them dwindle, but I'm telling you there's going to be enough for you and enough for me." And you can imagine even through her fear or her disbelief, she is faithful. She makes her way to her home, and she prepares a meal, and she brings it back to him. And it turns out that whatever dust is left in that jar it's enough, not just for her, not just for her son, not just for this stranger, but for her whole household, and not just for one meal but for many meals. Elijah speaks a word of faith to her in a moment when she needs to hear it and transforms the fear that she has into a faithful movement. And it makes me wonder what jars, what jugs are on our shelves at home or even within us that we have watched dwindle day after week after month after year. What is it that you believe you have come to the end of? What is it that you have tried to be a faithful steward of but you've got nothing left to give? What relationship is it? What thing at work? What part of your faith journey, right, have you just been watching almost like you could do nothing about it, just watching the supplies dwindle and dwindle and dwindle and run out. What is the word of provision that you yearn to hear today? Because the woman didn't expect that word when she was collecting sticks, but it came to her anyway, because it wasn't just Elijah's word, it was the word of God to her through the prophet. You have more in that supply than you imagine. It's going to go further than you ever could think it will go. I was contemplating—for me—what I've stared at—the jug of oil that's gotten lighter and lighter and lighter in my hand, the jar of meal that I've been taking scoops out of every single day, and no one's coming to replenish it. I was thinking about that this week and really reflecting on what it meant for me, and one of the things that I feel like the Lord put on my heart is this idea that 'you know you're not the only one with a shelf and jars and jugs. This is a longer story about provision than just about you or just us.' Today when we celebrate All Saints Day, we think about all the faithful people across the arc of history who have at one point or another said, "I've got nothing left to give. I have no idea what's about to happen. It feels like I need to collect some sticks for a brief last supper, and that's going to be all for me."

Thinking about the Saints of Idlewild reminded me of a story that maybe you've read. Our new members just got our history book, and I know that a few of our new members have read this story. It's a story about this building, actually. Y'all have probably heard it before. This building's Cornerstone was laid in 1926, construction concluded in 27. We call it the 1928 building from the time that we began to worship here. So y'all know, if you're history people, that just a few years after this building was constructed and completed and we began to become the place of

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worship, the third place of worship for Idlewild Presbyterian Church, just a few years after that economic turmoil fell upon our nation. The Great Depression swept across it, and all of a sudden the supplies were drying up, and not just in some figurative way but quite literally, the gifts that the people, the saints of Idlewild, could bring to the paying of the bonds was less and less and less. And so the story goes that there was a group of three men, men of Idlewild, who when they realized that they couldn't collect any more money, they went to the bond holders in St. Louis. They took a night train—our history says they took a night train there. And the story that we like to remember together is that they walked into the bond holder's office, and he said, "Where is the money for the bonds?" And we said, we shook the keys in front of him, and said, "We don't have it." Threw the keys on the desk and said, "You can have a church in Memphis." But that's not what really happened. What really happened is we tried, those three men tried to explain themselves and say, "If you'll just give us a little bit of time, if you'll renegotiate the terms of this loan, we will satisfy it." I thought a lot about those men this week, because it was a brazen thing to make the trip to St. Louis to the bond holder's office, but I imagine, because they are just like you and me, that train ride at night felt some sort of way. I imagine they were scared. I imagine they were worried. I imagine they were fearful. I imagine that they thought about all the hopes and the dreams of all the saints of Idlewild kind of resting on them; and I imagine even as they went into the office and asked for a continuance on the loan, they were terrified, because they knew that their jar was nothing but dust, and their jug—it only smelled of oil. And the story goes that the bondholder really wasn't hearing it. And when they had nothing else to offer, one of the men spoke up and said to the bondholder, "Do you have a preacher?" The bondholder looked at him confused. "Do I have a preacher?" "Yeah, do you have a preacher?" "No, I don't have a preacher." "Well, you have a church in Memphis, Tennessee." And it turns out that the—as many of y'all know—the man didn't want a church in Memphis, Tennessee. He wanted the note to be paid, so they renegotiated. And I imagine the feeling of taking that train back from St. Louis was something akin to the woman coming back from her kitchen that day saying, "I don't know how this happened, but the shepherd has supplied my needs and yours as well. I can't tell you how the dust in that jar and the remnants of oil became enough to eat for the next few days, but it has." And it made me wonder, it made me wonder about the supply that you feel has run out in your life. What is it that feels dusty and almost completely dried up? Whatever it is, what we know is that the God that sent Elijah to Zarephath and the God that spoke through Elijah to the widow was a God who has a different ending to the story than we imagine, a God who takes what meager things we think we have and multiplies them in ways we couldn't have imagined. Now some things are a foregone conclusion, some things are silver dollar turtles, and they need to die; but other things are worth continuing to believe and trust in the supply of God—relationships, that parenting struggle you're having, that way of trying to figure out how you fit your spiritual life into your calendar, that thing that's going on in your marriage, that way of having to parent your parents, maybe something with your faith journey. I know not what jar you think of setting on your shelf. I know not what jug you think of setting on your shelf. But what I do know is that in and through the God that we know in Christ Jesus, there is a supply, a provision, that can transform our fearfulness into faithfulness, that can transform what we believe to be the end of the story into something beautiful and even miraculous.

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So my hope for you this morning and maybe for us collectively is that we might position ourselves within the great arc of God's history that includes Elijah and includes the widow of Zarephath and includes Jesus the Christ who we thought we knew the end of the story and then all of a sudden we didn't, and includes you as well. When you peer upon the dust left in your jar, the remnants of the oil in your jug, may you know that the God that we know in Jesus Christ can provide, can sustain, can work something beautiful and new and hopeful, that that God is indeed a shepherd who can supply our needs.

Perhaps you need to hear the words of Elijah today, or perhaps, the time will soon arise when you need to speak the words of Elijah to another. May you hear and speak assured that God meets you in your need just as God met the widow in hers.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.