

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, 8 November 2008
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Today's scriptures brought us two well-known widows. First the widow of Zarephath who feeds Elijah in the time of drought and famine – and then the widow in the Temple whose tiny contribution aroused such praise from Jesus.

These are both people I imagine none of us wish to be and yet are presented to us as models of faithfulness.

First, the widow of Zarephath. We have more of her story – and yet I suspect that fewer of us remember her. I have always had a great fondness for her story, probably because it speaks directly to my heart.

We begin with Elijah, that great prophet who is called to speak for God when no one wants to listen, whose life is continually threatened by all of the powerful people, who is at cross purposes even with the religious leaders of his time. God is always calling him into improbable and difficult situations. This time the prophet is told to go to Zarephath which belongs to Sidon. To those of us in the 21st century Zarephath and Sidon just sound like typical bible names, not evoking any particular emotion. But they would have evoked fear and anxiety in Elijah. Sidon was an enemy of Israel. (Think Goliath and the Philistines.) They were continually at war – so that going down to Sidon at that time was a dangerous thing to do. And Elijah, that well-known and unpopular spokesman for the God of Israel, is told to go to this enemy territory and seek food and shelter from one of the local inhabitants.

Can't you imagine his inner self responding just like Jonah? (No, thank you – I think I would rather go somewhere else, anywhere else.)

But Elijah does as he is told and approaches a lone woman he finds along the way. And we must continually remind ourselves of how inappropriate it was in their cultures for him to approach her without any of her family around. Merely speaking to her is a threatening and improper thing.

And then we get to know a little about her. She is described as a widow. Using that as her only identifier means she has no family to belong to, no protected place in society. She is absolutely vulnerable, because her fate is no one's responsibility. It takes great strength to keep going when you are cut off like that. And this is not a prosperous time when even the people at the bottom of society can survive on the 'trickle down' from the wealthy and successful. This is a time of remarkable drought, and consequent famine. Everyone is running out of food. Plants and animals and people are all dying due to the lack of water.

This woman, like many in Israel and Sidon and the surrounding countries, is running out of food, with no hope of more. But what is hardest for her is that she has a son. She is part of no structure to care for her in her need – and yet she is responsible to care for her child. I always imagine what pain there must have been in her heart as she watched her son get thinner and weaker.

And then this foreigner, this wild man who annoys kings and has just been hiding out in the wilderness being fed by ravens, comes and asks her for a little bread and water. And she responds with some of the most heart-wrenching lines anywhere: “... , 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.”

“...that we may eat it, and die.” This is the very last of their food, their last meal, after which she anticipates the slow and painful death of starvation. Together she and her son will die of want. It must have added to her already extraordinary pain to have to thus fail in hospitality to the stranger, even as she had to admit her failure to be able to care for her son.

Yet she does not seem to speak with resentment, only resignation and hopelessness.

And Elijah reassures her that if she responds to his request, God will provide what she and her son need. I do not know whether she believed him – or just thought, “Why not? What we have is nearly nothing, why not share it? Death will come soon anyway.”

Whatever her thoughts, she did as Elijah asked – and they all ate a bit – and somehow each day afterward there was still enough to eat for all of them.

This widow of Zarephath must have been astounded and immensely grateful for this unexpected blessing. Which is where our reading today ends. But if you know her story you know that no sooner had they all settled into confidence that they would survive the drought than suddenly her son becomes deathly ill.

The widow blames the prophet and Elijah accepts the blame. He takes God to task, demanding to know what God can be thinking to bring such disaster into this household after sending the prophet there with promise of bounty.

Elijah’s prayer restores the boy to life – and he and his mother are able to go on with their lives after the dreadful time of drought and famine ends – and Elijah goes on to further adventures.

Twice that widow confronted her son’s imminent death and had the strength to do whatever she could to care for him, to stay with him, to share his life for however long he had it.

She was a woman of sorrow, but great strength.

In the Gospel Jesus calls attention to another widow. Imagine this scene. Jesus and some of his followers are in the crowded and noisy Temple precincts, by the treasury, the place where everyone

contributed their tithes, the Temple taxes they owed by law as well as their free will offerings to God. There were important people bustling around, wealthy people with lots of servants, ostentatious people in gorgeous robes. Lots to attract one's eye.

But Jesus notices the invisible, disregarded people. He calls attention to a poor widow. Again, this is someone who has not been taken in marriage by another member of the family to keep her connected and cared for. She has fallen out of the fabric of family and community. She is on her own, with little livelihood. She could easily despair, just give up and die – or she could rant and rail against unjust fate.

Or she could slink and hide, hoping to avoid the pity and scorn of the more fortunate. Yet here she comes among all those wealthy powerful people and brings all she has to put in the treasury.

Can you imagine the scorn such a gesture would arouse? Stupid woman! How are you going to eat?! Have you no sense? Your little mite won't make any difference anyway. What need has the Temple of your tiny coins that will probably just be lost in the coffers?!

But Jesus does not say any of those things. Jesus holds her up as an example. We do not know whether, like the widow of Zarephath, she is somehow enabled to have enough to live on after she has given her last bit away. That is not Jesus' focus. "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The others contributed out of their abundance. There was no worry or sacrifice. They did what they were expected to do – and they anticipated appreciation and recognition in exchange – perhaps they expected God's blessings as their due recompense. But the widow lived out those words from the offertory, "All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee."

The wealthy and powerful were making their offerings as part of the ordinary daily course of things. It was nothing special. The widow, on the other hand, seems to be expressing and furthering an important relationship.

She probably had no human closeness to rely on, but she does not withdraw in despair. She turns to God, and gives all she has, knowing that God is inviting her into relationship. The others are not changed by their donation any more than they were changed by the purchase of some grain. But this widow, like the one in Zarephath, gives the last she has to live on, and in turn receives her life from God, receives a deepened relationship with the One who gives all life. Her life is transformed in the exchange. We are not told what happens next in her life, but we do know that no one can remain unchanged after such a complete surrender.

Throughout Scripture we are commended to care for the widows and orphans – that is the standard we are judged by – how do we treat the least of these? But in these stories the least, the outcast, the foreign, the penniless widows, are the ones who mirror God’s generosity. They are the ones with open hands. We are not merely to care for the widows – we are meant to be the widows, to surrender our claims to power, to give up our need for control.

I said in the beginning that none of us would want to be either of them, to be outcasts, looked down on by the rest of society, with no power over our own lives, with destitution a mere moment away. But we do want to be people in close relationship with God. We want to be the poor in spirit that the Bishop spoke about last week, those who truly understand our utter dependence on God, those who therefore are able to live out God’s infinite generosity, to share whatever we have, to hold everything in an open palm.

It is clearly no coincidence that these readings occur in the lectionary in the heart of the Stewardship season. They are images of God’s special love for the least among us, reassurance that all of our offerings, however small, are beloved of God, that when we approach with open hands, God is there to welcome us with joy. These widows listened to God’s call upon their resources and responded in ways that would have seemed very foolish to sensible people – but in their Godly foolishness they found blessing, found relationship with God who never turns us out the way people do.