

“From Cherith to Zarephath”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
All Saints Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 30, 2016

1 Kings 17:1-16

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “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.” The word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

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.

Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead. This is the first time we hear of this man, who goes on to become the most famous prophet in all of Israel, both during his lifetime and for centuries afterward. The biblical Elijah gains his fame for two reasons: he challenges the idolatry of the mighty and he works miracles that demonstrate God’s power. Both are at work in today’s Scripture.

Ahab, who reigns as a powerful and long-lived king in this text, is a few generations after King David. Success leads him down a path of idolatry, and he marries a non-Israelite woman, Jezebel. According to tradition, Jezebel was an evil woman who expanded the worship of a Canaanite god, Baal, in Israel. This idolatry is what Elijah—a prophet of the Lord—shows up to protest. He declares to Ahab that there will be no rain for years in Israel as a sign of God’s displeasure. Baal’s specialty as a Canaanite god is water and rainfall, so drought will be “proof” that Baal is defeated.¹ However, calling out the powerful King Ahab and Queen Jezebel is hazardous to Elijah’s health. God gives him instructions to escape the danger. “Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.”

“East of the Jordan” is filled with potent historical memories, because “east of the Jordan” is where the Hebrew people came from. After escaping slavery in Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness while they slowly learned to trust their God. Throughout those forty years, they were supernaturally guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They witnessed personally, intimately the

¹ Choon-Leong Seow, “1 Kings 17:1-7 Commentary” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 126.

power of this God, who provided for them again and again in the barren wilderness. God split open rock and gushed forth water. God heard their starvation worries and sent manna—food from heaven. When they grumbled about the tastelessness of this holy food, God sent quail so they were not only fed but satisfied too. So when God sent Elijah to Cherith, it was as though God sent him through a time machine, back to an era filled with these stories, and the saints of old such as Miriam, Aaron, Moses, Caleb and Joshua. Wouldn't you know it—God takes care of Elijah with the same miraculous power as all the other stories that have taken place “east of the Jordan”. Ravens come every day and night to bring bread and meat, showing God's care and God's remembrance of Elijah there.

One can live in the land of memory for a long time this way, gaining sustenance among the stories and wonders of the past. Elijah represents any of us who open a photo album and get lost in the memories captured there. He's like me when I get in your archives room upstairs, so fascinated by the history and stories captured there that I lose all sense of time. When taken too far though, this is the shadow side of the past. Memories can become traps and black holes—so potent they get in the way of the present or the future. But the danger is that old ways dry up sometimes, like the Wadi Cherith. What once was sustaining and apparently permanent fails to have the same effect any longer. Sometimes God's provision—unwelcome though it may be at the time—comes in the call to leave the place that is now only ghosts, and to strike out for new territory.

That's what happens to Elijah. God sends this prophet from what's known in Cherith to what's new in Zarephath. *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.”* This has to be a stretch for dear Elijah. He's gotten used to living on his own in the wilderness east of the Jordan. He's even grown accustomed to being fed by ravens, of all things. Yet now he has to pack up and move out to an unfamiliar place. It's not like Zarephath was an out-of-the-way Hebrew town. No, Zarephath is a foreign Phoenician capital city known for its trading and not for its kindness to itinerant Hebrew prophets. Furthermore, Elijah is to travel into the region of Sidon, where Queen Jezebel is from and where Baal-worship is the way of the land! Then when he gets there, Elijah will be fed by a widow, which is almost as preposterous as getting fed by ravens. One biblical scholar points out that “In the [Old Testament], widows are typically associated with the neediest elements of society, the orphans and the poor.... Yet, it is this widow in a land devastated by drought who is to feed Elijah, and it is to her that he turns for sustenance. She who has such scarce means is instrumental in God's plan to provide for others.”² God sends Elijah into a foreign land, among likely enemies, seeking help from the sort of person one would least expect. Sometimes the path from Cherith to Zarephath, from the past to the future, goes by the mileposts of God's surprise and not by our own expectations.

Since God is at work in this, Elijah and the widow make a connection. She doesn't know what to expect from this prophet or his Hebrew God either. At the end of her meager food supplies due to the famine and drought, this widow is about to cook a final meal for herself and a child. Nevertheless, she shows compassion enough to share food and home, and that embrace of the unexpected stranger makes all the difference. Her food feeds him, and God's power in him ensures that her food never runs out. God gives each of them—in the other—the sort of community and gifts which will carry them through together. That's what's possible by the promise of God. They believe in God's provision when it's least expected, making a new, expanded household, living in trust on the word of the Lord.

In worship today, we travel just as Elijah did, from Cherith to Zarephath. We have remembered the saints of ages past, and those who have recently departed. We are here today only because of who they were to us, to the church, and to the world. At the same time, God calls us to not linger forever in the past,

² Choon-Leong Seow, 128.

but step forward into the present and the future. That's why in a moment we'll receive eight new members into this community. They come with unexpected gifts, drawn together by the wisdom of God for now and for the future which God reveals. Together we form new community, a new family of faith, both those who have the gift of memory through generations in this place and those who have only been here a handful of times. We each give what we have—time in worship, talents for other ministries, treasure in financial gifts—as though they are the widow's faithfully-offered meal and oil. Together we believe in and come to see God's ability to provide because of the other, including where we least expect it. As the church grows, reforms and changes with new people for a new time, one promise stays the same. The God of fire and cloud, manna and quail—the God of our faithful ancestors—remains the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is that God who gives us just what we need, both now and forever.

Let us pray, in the words of a Pentecost hymn:

*"We would raise our alleluias for the grace of former years;
for tomorrow's unknown pathway, hear, O God, our humble prayers.
In the church's pilgrim journey you have led us all the way,
still in presence move before us, fire by night and cloud by day."³ Amen.*

³ "Come, O Spirit, Dwell among Us" hymn, verse 2, by Janie Alford, adapted. *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).