

FEASTING IN THE FAMINE
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Reading: I Kings 17: 8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to him (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 hailed 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 is 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 was as her 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 general background of this story is set in the 9th century before the Common Era. It is a time of civil war. It is also a time of great drought and the famine that accompanied it. The characters are God, the prophet Elijah, and a pitiful family of Canaanites – a widowed mother, her son, and their “household.” Conflicts, such as war and famine often create odd communities that wonder how they will survive. As I will explain in a few moments, there is tremendous religious conflict in the book of I Kings that is reflected not only in this chapter but also in the 18th chapter. That chapter tells of the story of how Elijah challenged the priests of Baal and when they failed the contest Elijah put all 450 of them to death.

It is not unlike our present situation. There are wars across the globe, conflicts like immigration, and the great question of the distribution of resources that too often

leaves some families malnourished. There are religious tensions in nearly every nation I can think of.

The civil war in Sudan is one example. There have been 1.5 million people killed and millions more made homeless and impoverished. The majority of the people in northern Sudan are Arabic speaking Muslims who want to impose the Law of Sharia across the whole country. The religious minorities will not submit. Most of these live in southern Sudan and are Christians and Animists.

We have seen similar profiles in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and currently in the Middle East. If we are paying attention we can discern parallel conflicts in the cities and states throughout America. This 2,800-year-old story about Elijah may have something to teach us about what it means to live faithfully in such a world. Please allow me a few minutes to explore the intricacies of this prophetic tale.

Ahab, son of Omri, has ascended to the throne. Omri is thought to have been a shrewd king, based on texts outside the Hebrew canon. The Hebrews condemned Omri because of his association with the fertility gods of the Canaanites. And they heaped even more scorn on Ahab. “And Ahab, son of Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him.” (I Kings 16:30) What is this great evil? It was the worship of Baal.

The word “Baal” means lord, or master, or husband. It could be used as the proper name of a local deity or it could refer to all of the pagan gods. In the mythology and cult of the ancient Syrians Baal was a major deity. Baal was often found in the company of Astarte, goddess of fertility; and Dagon, a vegetarian deity.

Throughout the ancient world every locality, be it hamlet, town, or village had its own god or goddess. This would also be true of unique places that were thought to be sacred such as springs, wadis or oasis, and mountaintops. Whether the Hebrew people were in Egypt or Canaan their god, Yahweh, was one of many. Baal represented the major competition to Yahweh.

Gerhard Von Rad notes that Baal “is the mythical generative power that fructifies the earth by means of the sperm of the rain. Human beings share in his fertilizing power by entering the mystery and imitating it. Cultic prostitution was therefore an essential characteristic of this worship.”¹ Now do let this little piece of information slip by as some kind of titillating anthropological news. This gets at the very heart of the story and of Jewish theology’s critique of all forms of paganism or what is often called idol worship. The myth says that when it rains Baal is showering the earth with his sperm. From this impregnation of the earth the trees, fruits, grains, and vegetables germinate, flower, and become fruitful. The human act of sexual copulation is a re-enactment of this mystery. It is thought to be sacral. And indeed, there were temples dedicated to the worship of Baal with temple prostitutes available for such divine theatre.

Yahweh was thought to be the god of the sky or heavens. In Jewish theology Yahweh becomes distinct from the creation and recreation of nature. The distinction is between creature and Creator. Clearly, Yahweh is not the god of procreation, and certainly not of sacral sex. Rather, Yahweh is the God of just and righteous

¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), Vol. I, p. 22.

relationships, within whose context is the fertilization of plants, animals, and human beings.

Ahab ascends to the throne and takes Jezebel as his wife. He is condemned by the Hebrew bible because Jezebel is the daughter of King Ethbaal. Ahab served King Ethbaal whose name means “Baal exists.” Ahab worshipped Baal. And to add insult to injury, Ahab erected a “sacred pole,” meaning a phallic totem.

That is the background. And when we enter chapter seventeen we find that there is a drought in the land. Do you get it? No rain has fallen! The Deuteronomist is telling us that Baal is infertile. Ahab is infertile!

Within chapter 17 are three vignettes. The first tells us that the prophet Elijah is being fed by ravens by the Wadi Cherith. They bring him bread and meat in the morning and evening. He drinks from the wadi until the pool is dried up by the drought. In the second vignette Elijah goes to Zarephath where he meets the widow and asks her for water and bread. He is fed and the woman never runs out of meal or oil and their bodies are sustained. In the third vignette the widow’s son dies and Elijah prays the boy back to health.

I want to hone in on the widow’s hunger and the issue of food. Obviously Elijah is hungry. But the woman has given up. She lives deep in Baal home turf. The town of Zarephath is near Sidon. And guess what? Sidon is the hometown of Jezebel. Does it get any better than this? The point is that Baal cannot provide for the people in his own kingdom; neither can Ahab or Jezebel. How’s that fertility worship working for you Zarephath? And it is clear that this woman has lost all faith. She does not believe that anyone can save her or her family. She is not expecting divine

intervention. Her god cannot feed. In fact, she imagines that the little loaf of bread that she is about to prepare and eat will be her last meal. Her poverty has so limited her horizons that even her language offers the bare minimum of limitations. In cryptic Hebrew she says, “I will go, I will prepare it, we will eat, and then we will die”

Elijah asks her to feed him. Now she has a problem worse than death. She is not able to provide the hospitality expected in every home in the ancient Middle East, regardless of religion. All she has is a little jug of oil, a small jar of meal, and two sticks of firewood. Why you can hardly make toast on two sticks. But Elijah tells her not to worry about that but to trust in the Lord, the God of Israel. In other words, put a little faith in the God of the common good, the God of the common round, the God of the shared table. Put your trust in the God of justice and right relationships and let’s see how long we will be sustained.

And of course, the jar of meal and the jug of oil provide them with bread for many days to come. Their limitations became opportunities for life.

Just for fun let me tell you that the drought continues into chapter 18. As I mentioned earlier, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. Elijah wins the contest and puts the pagan priests to the sword. And guess what happens? The drought is broken by rushing rain.

Now Elijah would eventually admit to the Pastor Parish Relations Committee that he went a little too far in the killing of the 450 preachers of Baal. But there are several points to be made about his meal with the widow of Zarephath.

The first lesson is that no matter who’s God we worship human suffering is universal. Though a prophet of Yahweh, Elijah too endured the drought. Lord knows

that suffering strikes the just and the unjust, the kind and the cruel, the Christian and the Buddhist, the Jew and the Muslims, the good and the bad. The story indicates that Baal's impotence brought drought to both Elijah and the widow. Everybody suffers! I have decided that it is a major waste of time trying to decide which god to blame.

Suffering is a part of life.

I am much more interested in this question: Given the fact that suffering is universal, what set of values is going to see us through the hurt and pain? Where can I put my faith that promises life and hope? Whom do I trust in the midst of calamity? The path that Elijah points to is that of God's universal love. It is the path of compassion. It is the path of shared resources. The path of God is the highway of the open table. We will mix what little meal we have and the few ounces of oil we have and bake bread and share it with everyone who comes to the table. The promise of this story is that God will sustain us in the shared and sharing community. As we offer our limited gifts they become abundant.

When people are greedy and take from others discord and death follow. When we hoard and refuse to share, even as people are starving, all will be destroyed. The gospel tells us over and over again that it is only in giving that we receive. Is it not fascinating that when a disaster strikes people come together to support each other, share what little is left, and think constantly of how they might help. When we are secure, fat and sassy we are typically selfish. We saw that after 9/11. People from all over the United States went to New York to help search for victims, offer comfort to survivors, and begin the process of cleaning up. The same thing happened after a tornado leveled the town of Greensburg, KS. Very often people will say, "I don't

have much to offer but I'm here to help.” Maybe you are an EMT and can provide medical assistance. Maybe you are a counselor and can give psychological support. Maybe you are a youth group that spends a few days helping to rebuild a church. Maybe you can make coffee and peanut butter sandwiches. The important point is that we bring what meal and oil we have and bake bread and share it.

That is the only possible future that any of us can have, regardless of our religion, race, nationality, or political party. We all share who we are and what we have. Elijah did not turn down the bread of the pagan woman. She apparently put to good use his Jewish resources. When we need blood we do not much care about the race or religion of the blood donor. When we are hungry for food it matters not whose country it came from. The human race will only survive to the extent that we share with one another.

When we talk about the sharing community no one is exempt. Every one brings to the kitchen what they can – no exceptions. If you have salt, we need it. If you have oil, we need it. If you have flour, we need it. If you have yeast, we need it. If you have water, we need it. If you have firewood, we need it. Never imagine that you do not have something to contribute. No matter how small it might seem to you, when it is shared all are blessed with abundance.

Every one sits at the table – no exceptions. We share our tacos, pita, cornbread, baguette, biscuit, crusty Italian, and peasant whole-wheat loaf.

When I say no exceptions I mean no exceptions. The world has no possible future if we imagine that some are welcome to the table and others are not. There are no racial distinctions; no religious distinctions, no political distinctions, no economic

distinctions, no gender distinctions, no gender orientation distinctions, no ability distinctions, and no age distinctions. You could think of distinctions all day long and not one of them will matter. There are no distinctions! If you come up to me at coffee hour and say, “Well, what about so-and-so,” you have missed the point. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a radical gospel of inclusion.

I have often thought that the best Christian metaphor for the gospel is the church’s potluck supper. Do you remember those from days gone by? I will never forget the potluck dinners at Trinity United Methodist Church in Clermont, Ga. People would bring in platters laden with food – fried chicken, fresh sliced tomatoes, fried okra, green bean casserole, homemade pies and cakes, smoked sausage, corn on the cob, and potato salad. You were a little reluctant to start eating for fear that you would get full and then see someone come in late with a piping hot platter of smoked ribs or a red velvet cake three feet tall. I was always amazed that after every one had eaten there was still enough food to feed the whole crowd two or three times over.

Everybody was different and everybody shared. Nobody made fried okra the same as anybody else. Every ice-cream churn had its own flavor – strawberry, peach, peppermint, chocolate. Everybody was welcome and everybody was fed. It might seem like a simplistic metaphor to you. It might not provide the intellectual political or economic solution you might have hoped for. But it is a concrete and human model that has been known to work. The trick is to invite the whole community to come and share.

The church potluck might not end world hunger but it reminds us of who we are and who we are called to be as the body of Christ. So, bring what you have because we will need it. Invite your neighbors. Let no one leave hungry.

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