

A Person of God
I Kings 17.8-24
Pentecost +3, Year C
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Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

You'd think by now that we realize the stories of scripture rarely go the way we think they should go. Our assumptions are that the people of God are always the good guys, the protectors, the servants, the givers, and everyone else plays a supporting role as villain or enemy or plot device. We very much hold that assumption in present time for ordinary life here and now. And yet, the whole of scripture, not just a few of the Jesus stories, takes people's assumptions about God and expands, flips, stretches those assumptions to make room for something bigger.

That's why I think the stories of Elijah before us this morning are like the stories of our lives. You may initially balk at such a suggestion because the tales told in I Kings are dynamic folklore—ravens bearing daily meat and bread in their talons, magical jars of flour and oil that never run out, a dead child brought back to life. These stories can't be like ours, we hesitate, because our lives are quite ordinary. But the stories of Elijah, like much of scripture, remind us to pay attention and stay awake to the movement of the Divine for God does not move in the ways we expect or in the places we expect or in the patterns we expect.

We jumped ahead last week as Elijah, the last prophet of Israel, reminds God's people of their story and remembers God to them while inviting them back onto the path of God. Today we are in the story before the story while Elijah is hiding, running, and less than confident about being the last prophet of Israel. God sends Elijah to the east. And in that foreign, faraway place, he hides by a valley, God sends meat and bread by way of ravens and water in what should be a dry valley. In a place that isn't home, God provides and protects. In a place that is frightening and isolating, God is present and conspiring for goodness. In a place where no one would expect God to be present, God is everywhere.

Because Elijah is connected to the voice of God, he hears and follows the next instruction to go to Zarephath to live with a widow who allegedly has been commanded to provide for Elijah. When he arrives, he seems to be more of an unwanted and unexpected guest but speaks as though it may be an honor for this widow to care for him. I am projecting modern manners onto this ancient story, but the widow certainly seems shocked by his request for bread and water.

There is a drought in the land. If we read chapters 17 and 18 aloud together, you would hear the repetition of drought, no rain, dried up across the text. In both ancient and modern times, when there is not enough rain, then the crops wither and die. And when the crops wither and die, who is most vulnerable? Widows, orphans, and the poorest of the poor. See the reports from southern and eastern Africa as the effects of climate change are already felt for as many as 36 million people. When there is dry land, there is neither adequate food nor water. And in a setting such as this, Elijah appears before a desperate and frightened widow and mother of one son and demands (more than he asks) for water and bread. The widow is the one who needs care, and she is unexpectedly called on to provide. She has no idea she is sitting in the midst of a miracle and that her actions of trust will change her own story.

She looks at him and tells of her desperation. She is collecting sticks for one last fire to bake one last meal for her son, and then they will die together of starvation for there is nothing left in her home. Elijah seems to suddenly understand that God is not just providing for his needs here but for hers and the son's as well. Immediately he speaks the words that angels speak to frightened shepherds and Jesus speaks to terrified disciples: Do not be afraid. In the face of certain death and tragedy, as the world around you falls apart, against all logic: Do not be afraid. Elijah is connected to the heart of God and knows the jar or meal and jug of oil will continue to provide for all three of them. In fact, the words he speaks to the woman are so true and so powerful that they are the words of the Lord.

That would be a great place to end the text, this woman with no name, no power, and no protection who provides saving acts for herself, her son, and Elijah in a time and place and culture that have left her for dead. And yet...after all of this, the son of the woman becomes ill "so severe that there was no breath left in him." While weeping for her lost child, she turns to Elijah in the rage of a mother who has held her child as his breath left him, and blames Elijah for drawing God's attention to her. God had surely forgotten or ignored her before, and now, to her mind, God knows where she lives because Elijah has shown up at her house. This man of God has brought her sin to God's eyes which has cost her an only son.

Elijah does not argue theology with her. He, too, is overcome with emotion at this scene and takes a turn holding the boy's body. For the first time in scripture, Elijah takes the child to an upper room and cries out before God. He rages against God on the woman's behalf and then begins a grieving, rocking incantation over the boy's body, repeating, "O Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again." "O Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again." "O Lord, my God, let this child's life

come into him again." And for the first time in scripture, "the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived." Elijah grieves and weeps and cries out to God, argues with God and tells God, "this death is against your nature. This isn't who you are. Breathe the breath back into him." And God listens and acts.

To be sure, God surprises Elijah in this story by listening to his cries and responding. Elijah calls out to God to save this child's life, and God moves. But Elijah isn't the only one who is surprised. Surely God is surprised, too. Professor Amy Erickson offers, "The boy's life returns because God recognized that the word of Elijah was truth...Even when Elijah protests against God, his word expresses *God's truth*. Amazingly, God recognizes it too. Perhaps truth is not just the word of God delivered from on high. Because at least in this narrative, truth emerges out of a dialogue between God and humanity."¹

It is in the midst of this truth speaking that the woman recognizes Elijah as a person of God. His words are not just true but spoken with power because of his connectedness to the Divine. Most of us expect life to move with certainty and predictability. And if we are pressed to say so, we may have a hunch that God moves in those same ways. We may hope to have passing moments of sensing God's presence but do not expect to experience God in all the hidden moments of our lives. The stories of Elijah challenge our notion of what it means to be a person of God. Elijah hears the voice of God and knows God's ways before any words are spoken—later he recognizes God in the "sound of sheer silence."² He goes where God sends him, he eats the food God provides, he knows there is no need for fear, he shouts and cries out for God to act, and even God is impressed by their connection.

May this be the connection we are after—strong and intuitive, rooted in truth and not fear, close as breath and anchored by power. May we realize our lives are unpredictable and extraordinary. May we listen for God in the sound of sheer silence. May we live so boldly and with such centered confidence that one might say, "Now I know that you are a person of God." May it be so. Amen.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=598

² I Kings 19.1-15