

“Ain’t Got Time to Die”

I Kings 17: 8-16, (17-24), Luke 7: 11-17

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How many of you remember that old spiritual, “Ain’t Got Time to Die?” “Lord, I keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus, keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus, keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus, ain’t got time to die.” That song came to mind this week as I pondered these two stories. There have been times in my life when I was teetering on the brink, but before disaster struck I came to my senses and realized, “I ain’t got time to die.” Before I could make a hasty decision I understood the future was brighter than I could see, there was more for me to do, more that God wanted me to do. Perhaps there has been a time when you wondered what God had in store for you because at that moment, whatever God wanted, just was not clear. Perhaps like the widow in the story, you were living day to day, meal to meal, paycheck to paycheck, seeing only darkness on the horizon. You were holding onto hope, trusting that your fortunes would change, but were prepared to face the worse. Into that uncertainty God sends a messenger, a savior, one who can lead you out of that situation.

I can only imagine for those of you who are old enough to have lived through the depression that this woman’s story is very real to you. There must have been days when you watched your mom or grandmother go to the cupboard only to find a few vegetables and perhaps not much more. There are millions of people today who still face such challenges. They go to the pantry, only to find a jar of sauce and a half-empty box of pasta and hope they can stretch those meager provisions into several meals. Fortunately, in today’s story, the prophet Elijah arrives unannounced and unexpected into this desperate widow’s life. God promises to take care of her until the crisis passes.

I can relate to this woman’s despair. I admit, I have always had a roof over my head and enough to eat. I have never been in a situation where I felt unsafe or unable to care for my children or myself. However, there was a pivotal moment in my life when I felt as though my future was uncertain if I did not make a significant change. Spiritually and emotionally I had a pinch of flour and enough oil for one more meal. It happened when I was 26 years old and in my second year of seminary. I woke up one morning, having celebrated the beginning of another semester with several friends and several bottles of wine the night before. I did not necessarily drink often, but too often, when I did, I drank too much. This time, my body said, enough is enough. We all know how easy it is to ignore the messages our body sends us. You tell yourself to sleep it off, or swear off alcohol for a while and you’ll be fine, or just have a few drinks next time and you’ll be okay. This time, the excuses weren’t going to work.

The widow in today’s story has an “Elijah” moment. Just when she is ready to give up and throw in the towel, “along comes Elijah.” God sends Elijah to bring her back from the brink and remind her she is not alone. She is a single woman raising a child alone. She had every reason to be suspicious of this man. However, amazingly enough, she

trusts Elijah. He tells her to do what she thinks is impossible. To take what she sees as nothing and turn it into more than enough. She can see there is scarcely enough flour and oil in her jars to feed her and her son, let alone another person, but she does as Elijah says without arguing. She is ready to die, so if what he says is not true, she is no worse off than before he showed up.

Along comes Elijah to lead us toward that which we thought was impossible. I did not wake up 17 years ago and stop drinking because it was the right thing to do (even if it was the right thing to do.) If it were up to me to begin and sustain that journey it would never have happened. The Holy Spirit, my own Elijah, promised that God would sustain me and that there would always be enough for me to survive. No stranger appeared at my door that day. I finally stopped listening to the wrong voice and put my trust in God. Even though I could see only a handful of flour and a little oil, not nearly enough to survive for very long, God promised there would always be enough. I would have enough of the things that bring true life if and when I was able to let go. God would fill that dark place with enough light to see me through my toughest days. Perhaps not that morning, but in time, God would send many Elijah's, faithful, compassionate, loving people who would be my manna.

When I was ready to participate in my own healing, I could recognize that what happened that day was not magic or something I was able to bring about myself, but it was the hand of God at work in my life. God had been there all along, prompting me to make better choices; perhaps protecting me when I did not listen. Like many people who abuse alcohol, there were times when I was living on the edge, making dangerous and risky choices. Thankfully my moment of salvation came when I was still relatively young. My life did not spin out of control. In fact, many people would never know that I even have this struggle in my life.

It is always easy to dismiss these stories of miraculous healing because we think such things will never happen to me. We don't want to believe or perhaps we are too afraid to believe that it just might happen. Perhaps God will intervene in your life to save you from that moment just before death. Perhaps you will have to stop clinging to the stuff that you think gives you power but in fact, only keeps you further separated from God and the ones who love me most. In the days of Elijah or Jesus, there was no such thing as being clinical death, bringing someone back to the land of the living through a shot of medicine or a jolt of electricity to your heart. If you were dead and then suddenly were alive again, it was nothing short of a miracle.

The widow in today's story is brave and faithful. She had no reason to trust Elijah and every reason to believe that her vision of the future would hold true. Why would anyone want to save her? With the resources she had, who could possibly stave off death? She meant nothing to this man Elijah and presumably nothing to his God. However, God uses this encounter with the widow and her son to teach others about God. There are no conditions on God's mercy, compassion or generosity. God sends Elijah to this woman precisely because she is vulnerable, alone and neglected by the larger community. She has no one to care for her; she is entirely at the mercy of others.

Many people feel unworthy of God's love or attention. They wonder why God would bother with them, with their problems, with their struggles. It is easy to feel that way. But God is compassionate when others are not. God is merciful when others are not able to show mercy. God does not discriminate or place conditions or withhold or deny God's love for any reason. Elijah and Jesus are connections between God and God's people. Neither of them performs a miracle to bring glory to him. They do God's will in order to bring glory to God. Those who witness these miracles realize they are servants of God, sent by God to do God's work. Upon having her son healed, the widow proclaims to Elijah, "now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." What a wonderful compliment. We may not have the power to raise the dead or heal the sick, but how wonderful it would be if someone were to declare on your behalf, "now I know that you are a person of God."

We can be like Elijah and Jesus, not miracle workers, but conduits of God's grace. We can walk with a friend through his or her own desert journey. We can bring life sustaining food when their jars appear to be empty. We can speak a prophetic word when the world would rather ignore us. Being prophetic doesn't mean we have to be dramatic or obnoxious. We are prophetic when we are aware of the needs of our neighbors and we speak the truth about it. The power of prophecy is in the truth that we speak and the challenge that truth presents that leads us to do something that will truly make a difference.

Take a look in your jar. What do you see? Even if there is only a pinch of flour and drop of oil left, God will transform it into more than enough. You need only to get through that first day to see this is true. Then the days become weeks and weeks become months and months become years and then you realize, with great joy that you have what you need. This is not the result of a miracle, as the world defines it, or because of anything you have done to earn or deserve it. This happens because God has provided what you needed, whenever you needed it. When true crisis hits, along comes Elijah, the prophetic man of God, ready to do whatever it takes to sustain your life. May we have the courage and wisdom of the widow to welcome him in when he arrives on our doorstep? When we do, God promises a miracle. May it be so! Amen