

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TRINITY SUNDAY

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 30 & 146)*

One: Sing praise to the Lord, you faithful people.
All: **Give thanks to God's holy name.**
One: For the Lord restores our life –
All: **the Lord, who made heaven and earth,**
One: who is faithful forever,
All: **who gives food to the hungry,**
One: who watches over the stranger,
All: **who cares for widows and orphans.**
One: The Lord will reign forever.
All: **We will give thanks to God forever.**

***OPENING HYMN** “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” GtG 65

1. **Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty.
Hold me with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more;
feed me till I want no more.**

2. **Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow.
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield;
be thou still my strength and shield.**

3. **When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside.**

Death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee;
I will ever give to thee.

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Loving God, hear our prayer,
and forgive us.
We are blind to our own brokenness,
yet focused on the failings of others.
We have trusted too much in our own strength.
We have hidden our faces from those who suffer.
We have turned away from neighbors in need.
We have given up hope instead of seeking your help.
Lord, be gracious to us.
Forgive our sin,
and heal our brokenness;
speak life and forgiveness
to our weary souls. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: Beloved, hear the good news:
through Christ we are forgiven!
All: **Our hope is in the Lord our God,
who keeps faith with us forever.
God's mercy is everlasting!
Thanks be to God!**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING I Kings 17:1-24

I KINGS 17:1-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ 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.” ² The word of the Lord came to him, saying, ³ “Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴ You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” ⁵ 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. ⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. ⁷ But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹ “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹² 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.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” ¹⁹ But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ He cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” ²² The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” ²⁴ So the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

Elijah bursts on the scene with a bold, brash pronouncement to King Ahab: rain will cease to fall until the day he (Elijah) gives the command.

Then, just as quickly, Elijah leaves.

Almost every commentator says something about this sudden appearance of Elijah in the story. There is no ‘introduction’ of Elijah per se: he simply is there. There appears to be no need to introduce him to the king: he is already known. It seems he is already established as a prophet: he simply speaks, and it appears everyone takes him seriously.

But I have this not quite so serious thought: I wonder if perhaps Elijah was a little too brash and blurted out his pronouncement, not only to the surprise of King Ahab, but also to the surprise of God. Maybe God was not quite ready for Elijah to speak – not just yet.

So I picture God saying, “Psst! Elijah! Over here! You may have jumped the gun a little too soon, Elijah. You’re not quite ready. You see, there are a couple of things you need to learn before we proceed with the main event.”

So here in chapter 17, God pulls Elijah to the side and gives him a few lessons to learn.

Lesson number one: the raven and the wadi.

This is a simple lesson, so it seems: how nature sustains us.

The wadi is not a surprise. A wadi is a ravine or gully where water flows...intermittently. A natural place to find water...when there is plenty of water to be found. Of course, Elijah may have spoken too soon about no rain falling – so no water replenishing the wadi – so soon enough (or too soon) the wadi dries up. This is, after all, a drought.

The raven, though, is a surprise. Not quite a ‘natural’ phenomenon for a raven to provide bread and meat for another. As one person put it (quite bluntly),

ravens [are] not known for particularly strong symbiotic behaviors. (Roger Nam, *Working Preacher*, 2012)

(I think not.) And, while the raven helps out Elijah, there’s no word about how Elijah helps out the raven. Maybe the raven was content with a pat on the head and a hearty “Well done!” from God.

But there is much to be said, and learned, by us from this lesson: how indeed nature sustains us.

The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the building materials that house us – all, in some way, shape or form, come from the bounty of the world around us, a world of which we are intimately and integrally a part.

Nature – the world God created – helps sustain us. Have we forgotten that? Do we not see that? Will we not appreciate that and be grateful for that?

And with some hindsight on our part – and hopefully with a little foresight as well – do we not also see that, as nature takes care of us, we need to take care of nature?

In an earlier story we have a picture of the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve as caretakers of the Garden, tending the garden: to do so, not with the intent of using everything up as quickly as possible, but of nurturing the garden so that it may flourish and thrive for the benefit and beauty of all.

Nature takes care of us, as part of God’s sustenance of us.

Will we appreciate that? And will we take care of nature – this earth, this planet, our home – as well, so that through it we may continue to know God’s care and sustenance? Maybe we too could give a (metaphorical) pat on the head to the raven.

Lesson number two: the widow and her last supper.

The drought has fallen hard on the land. We need not be reminded of the devastating effect of drought on the land and its people. But here it is.

The woman, a widow, is gathering a few sticks to build a fire in order to bake some bread as a (last) meal for her and her son before they have nothing left to eat, and so will inevitably die. She is preparing their last supper.

It is at this point – at this her lowest point (before, of course, the lowest point of death) – it is at this point that Elijah asks her to bring him some water...and, oh, by the way, would you please also bring me a little bread as well? He invokes the tradition of hospitality: the obligation to provide for, to shelter, even a stranger, even in the worst and most dangerous of times. We may be most familiar with that notion from Psalm 23: remember the phrase? “*you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.*” Elijah is asking her to prepare him a table in the presence of their common enemy: the drought, and imminent death.

She is caught in that tension. And even though she objects at first, especially when he makes the additional request for something to eat, eventually she responds positively...after Elijah speaks an encouraging – and incredible – word: something about the “*jar of meal will not be emptied*” and “*the jug of oil will not fail.*” Even so, she had to risk her life and her future, not to mention her son’s life and her son’s future, to be hospitable: to offer care, even to a stranger – and a strange one at that.

Risking in order to care. Even as, in many ways, Elijah had to risk with the widow: risk that she would respond positively and believe the word he said (and would he believe it, too?).

What a lesson! Risking with each other in order to care, in order to share: in order to share compassion and hospitality...and life. Willing to give, sacrificially even, simply in order to care for another. And, lo and behold, in giving, to receive.

It is a challenging lesson, even in our time, even when, it appears, we have such an abundance. And we do, even though there are those who would whine and complain that we have so little. We are the richest nation in the world, in many ways. Why do we find it so hard to share? Yet we always want more, more, more.

But it seems the lesson of the widow and her last supper is that there is always room to share, to give...if we would but have the heart for it.

And the blessing is that, in some way, shape, or form, we always receive something back even as we give...if we would but look for it and be attentive to it. It may not always be a ‘tit-for-tat’ equivalency: i.e., food for food. Sometimes it may include a level of companionship for the journey...and for the crisis.

For companionship it is, as the widow and Elijah share their time together as the crisis deepens and deepens.

And so, they sustain each other.

Lesson number three: the widow’s son and the prophet’s word.

The widow and Elijah share in their fellowship and relationship.

And then the unthinkable happens: the widow's son dies, is taken from her. And not from the drought itself – at least, not directly – but from some unnamed illness.

In grief and agony she cries out and lashes out at Elijah, and his God.

And, to his credit, Elijah does not strike back at her, but demonstrates a level of understanding that gives him credit: demonstrates a level of understanding and care and compassion.

And then there is this wondrous, agonizing picture: Elijah says, “*Give me your son.*” And the woman, the widow – the mother – relinquishes her son: gives him up, hands him over to Elijah.

There are times when we have to give up our burden to another: when we have to hand it over to another – like the widow handing over her (dead) son to Elijah.

We must be willing to let go – even of that which is most precious to us – recognizing that someone else may be able to help, and do, what we cannot. In other words, recognizing our own limits, and recognizing – and accepting – gifts that differ from one person to another.

Remember Paul's speaking of the church as a body? (see I Corinthians 12) The eye cannot walk, but the feet can. The hands cannot hear, but the ears can. I am not called to be able to do and know everything, to have every gift and every strength. So we are called together into community, so that we may lean on one another and support one another and help one another with the gifts and strengths that we have that others may not have.

As Anna Carter Florence notes,

Elijah's survival is bound up in another's. They were to muddle through together. (2022 Festival of Homiletics sermon)

So Elijah and the widow must depend upon each other.

But, of course, this lesson goes farther...and deeper.

And it's all wrapped up in one word.

There are a lot of words spoken in this story: Elijah speaks, the woman speaks, God speaks.

But note this: of all the words that are spoken, of all the speaking that goes on in this passage, only once does the writer note that someone “hears” what is spoken:

Elijah cried out to the Lord [and] the Lord listened to [-heard-] the voice of Elijah.

If anyone really hears, it is the Lord who hears. On good days or on bad, in joy or in sorrow, through days of sunshine or through the deep shadow of death, the Lord hears.

And with that one word, we enter into that sticky realm of the issue of prayer and, specifically, ‘Does God hear prayer?’ ‘Does God answer prayer?’

I am reminded of the story where Moses is on the mountain receiving God's instruction. And the people get impatient as they wait. So they make an idol – a golden calf – and bow down to it as their god. And God is furious. And God vows to destroy the people and start all over with Moses. But Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. And then we read this wonderful phrase: “*and God changed God's mind*” (Exodus 32:14).

Does God hear our prayers? Can our prayers – do our prayers – influence God? The answer from the biblical witness is, “Yes.” The fuller answer is, “Yes...just not always the way we want or expect.”

In this case – the case of Elijah and the widow’s dead son – God answered in the way Elijah wanted and expected. For us, such is not always (nor often?) the case. But will we trust that indeed God does hear? And will we be encouraged and hope-filled and sustained by that? And will we accept and receive – and even embrace – that God may be answering our prayer, even now...just not necessarily in a way we anticipated or expected, or even wanted?

You see, maybe God is answering our prayer through a raven...instead of the dove we asked for. And maybe God is answering our prayer through a widow...instead of a young couple with 2.3 children. And maybe God is even answering our prayer through an obnoxious prophet who proclaims doom and drought, instead of through a pleasant ‘yes-man’ who cries ‘peace, peace’ when all along we know there is no peace.

God hears us, and God knows our need, and God answers. And God is working in our midst even now.

And ultimately – ultimately – God is **“on the side of life”***: for you, for me, for the world. The work, the ministry, even the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, make that clear. (Richard Nelson, First and Second Kings, Interpretation, p.113)

God is on the side of life.

Hopefully, we are too – in our giving, in our receiving, in our trusting and doing, in our praying.

And if so, then maybe we too, like Elijah, will be prepared – ready – to be used for God’s good purpose – for life.

***HYMN** “When the Poor Ones” GtG 762

**1. When the poor ones who have nothing share with strangers,
when the thirsty water give unto us all,
when the crippled in their weakness strengthen others,
Then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.**

**2. When at last all those who suffer find their comfort,
when they hope though even hope seems hopelessness,
when we love though hate at times seems all around us,
Then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.**

**3. When our joy fills up our cup to overflowing,
when our lips can speak no words other than true,
when we know that love for simple things is better,
Then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.**

(continued)

**4. When our homes are filled with goodness in abundance,
when we learn how to make peace instead of war,
when each stranger that we meet is called a neighbor,
Then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Hear us, O Lord...
People: ...be gracious to us and fill us with your life.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.**

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Thanks and praise to you, O God, for your goodness to us. Use our offerings to do more than we could believe or imagine, building a world of justice and healing where there is enough for all. And let us use the breath you have given us to speak your truth and sing your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me” GtG 543 (*Verses 1-2, 4-5*)

**1. God, be the love to search and keep me;
God, be the prayer to move my voice;
God, be the strength to now uphold me:
O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.**

**2. Bind to myself the Name of Holy,
great cloud of witnesses enfold;
prophets, apostles, angels witness:
O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.**

**4. Walking behind to hem my journey,
going ahead to light my way,
and from beneath, above, and all ways:
O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.**

**5. Christ in the eyes of all who see me,
Christ in the ears that hear my voice,
Christ in the hearts of all who know me:
O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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