

February 7 2021 [St. Andrew's, PEPC]

Scripture Readings:

1 Kings 17:2-24

A prophet named Elijah, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to King Ahab, "In the name of the Lord, the living God of Israel, whom I serve, I tell you that there will be no dew or rain for the next two or three years until I say so."

² Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: ³ "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. ⁴ You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."

⁵ So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. ⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ⁹ "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

¹² "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.'"

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

¹⁷ Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

¹⁹ "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

²² The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"

²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon: "The Edge of Trust"

It is much easier to talk about trusting God
than it is to live in it.

If Elijah were standing here today with you instead of me,
I think that's how he would start his story.

The courage it must've taken to stand in front of King Ahab
and tell him, that's it; no rain, no moisture, not until I say so.
A drought in a dry, desert-prone land is a death sentence.
But this prophecy of drought was the consequences
of Ahab's terrible leadership;
Ahab was one of Israel's wicked kings.

Married to and fully supportive of
a religious fanatic who believed in another god, Baal,
and a brutal soldier, inclined to kill and take from his people
rather than care for and protect.
So, drought, until Ahab changes his ways.
And then Elijah very sensibly took off
into the wilderness...
...in a drought, by himself,
with limited supplies.
Because God told him to.

That begins this series of three stories that we read together today,
stories where things look okay for a bit

and then everything goes bad...again.
And again.

First story.

Elijah goes out into the wilderness as directed by God, about 30 miles.

He goes, as directed by God,
to a water source that is not affected by the drought
and ravens bring Elijah food, night and morning,
as directed by God.

It seems like a good situation,
a good place to be,
to weather this drought that
God's imposed on Israel.

Until it isn't.

Because there was no rain in the land, the brook dried up.

It seems really obvious, doesn't it;
and yet, God sent Elijah there
to keep him safe and well-provided for...
...so it kind of doesn't make sense either.

Either way, God sends Elijah on to find a widow who will feed him.

Second story.

Elijah travels about 50 miles to Zarephath,
which is, incidentally, a community
in the very heartland of Baal worshiper-territory.

He finds her, asks her for water and for food.

But it turns out, she's down to her last meal
for her and her son.

Elijah relays God's promise to her,
that if she feeds Elijah,
her jar of flour and her jug of oil will not run empty.

Never full to overflowing, and not forever...

..just until the end of the drought.

But this is good enough for her,

and she and her son

and her new houseguest

had enough to eat

for many days.

And then the widow's son dies,

and she blames Elijah for drawing his God's attention to her,
reminding God of her sin.

And that's the third story.

Elijah asks God to raise the child from death,
 lamenting that tragedy has befallen even this widow
 who took him in at God's request.
 And God does;
 the boy lives, and continues to do so,
 we hope, for many years
 before death comes again.

But it's curious, isn't it, how the ways that God provides for Elijah keep...
 ...drying up, fizzling out and ending.
 Elijah will be safe and secure,
 fed and watered, thanking God, no doubt,
 for his care and provision,
 and then some new bad circumstance arises
 and Elijah is without, once more.

Not an easy way to live;
 after a while, he must've been constantly on edge,
 waiting for the next calamity to strike.

The always-quotable Shakespeare wrote this of trouble:
 When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
 but in battalions.
 Elijah would agree;
 I expect we do, too.

Our lives are often like this series of stories.
 Good times and hard times,
 stretches where it's peaceful,
 and moments when we need our courage,
 times when we've got unexpected companions,
 and times when we're alone;
 days when we have enough to get by on
 and days when we lose.

After a certain age, I think,
 most of us would simply say,
 "that's life."

It's a little more complicated for a faithful follower of God, though.
 We know that rhythm of days is not random or happenstance,
 chaotic or unguided;
 we believe that God is in charge.

When good days come, when good things happen,
we see God's caring hand,
providing those good things for us.
We call them blessings
and understand them to be gestures of care from God.

We have them, we appreciate them,
we recognise them as "from God"
and then, sometimes, they go.
We're healthy, and then we're not;
we have a job, and then we lose the job;
we have the relationship, the opportunities,
the 5-year-plan...
...and then we don't.

When things go bad, it doesn't always have to mean we've gone wrong.
Hard times and loss are not a withdrawal of blessing.
God still loves and cares for us in troubled times
as he does in good and peaceful times.

It's not a sign of breaking relationship between us and God, either.
Trouble and sorrow in our lives do not mean
that we've turned away from God,
that we've allowed our relationship with God to go untended
and that, like an unpruned vine,
it's stopped bearing fruit in our lives.

Feeling vulnerable and lost does not mean that our faith is lacking,
or that we've failed to grasp some lesson from God
and thus require remedial teaching.

Are you wondering how I can say these things so confidently?
Let's take another look at Elijah and his battalion of trouble and sorrow.

Elijah was in trouble with the king for conveying God's Word,
and God sent him to safety,
where he would have water to drink
and be provided with food by ravens,
certainly an unusual, only-God-could-manage-that,
way of looking after his prophet.

When the brook dries up, God provides for Elijah again,
sending him to the widow, deep in hostile territory.
Her supplies are nearly gone,

and God provides, not abundantly, but enough.
And it's interesting to note that there's an expiry date
on this provision, too:
just until the drought ends.

And yes, God provides and the boy is brought back to life,
but the boy is not immortal;
he'll die, as he should, some day.

Trouble keeps coming, and God never questions or criticizes Elijah;
God isn't taking away Elijah's blessings;
there's no indication that God and Elijah's relationship,
God and prophet,
has somehow started to fracture and fray;
God is not trying to teach Elijah something
or build up a fragile faith.

There's no sense at all that Elijah is less than beloved and loving in return.
And trouble still comes.
But when it does, God just comes through for Elijah,
provides what Elijah needs,
again and again and again.

Even if it's not a final fix,
the impermanence of God's provision for Elijah
doesn't make it
less powerful or inadequate
or somehow less good.

Every time, God provides;
because Elijah trusts God,
he must also live on the edge of that trust,
trusting that when something else happens,
God will come through for him, again.

And trust, I think, is maybe a more important part
of being faithful Christ-followers than we realise.
It's easier to talk about trust in God than live in it,
because living in that trust looks a whole lot
like what happens to Elijah
in the Scripture we read today.

It looks like gain and then loss,
having enough and then being in need,
being okay and then really not,

and still being confident, absolutely sure,
maybe even irrationally,
that God will come through,
every single time.

So let's talk about trust for a moment.
It's one of those ideas that's hard to define in a simple, easy way.

Trust is important and it's dangerous.
Trust allows us to depend on someone
when there's no outside force or circumstance
compelling them to give us what we need.

And that means that trust is also risky,
because there's no guarantee, no recourse,
if who we're trusting lets us down.
Trust makes us vulnerable because getting what we need
is entirely outside of our control;
we're relying on whoever it is we're trusting
to be able and willing to do it.

For us, as Christians, when it comes to God,
trust could simply be our reliance
on God's willingness and ability to provide,
in the context, for some of us,
of a history of God providing in our lives before.

But I'm not sure if that's always enough
to get us from knowing in our heads that God would and could provide,
to trusting that God will come through for us,
when we're in the middle of trouble;
to understand that experiencing trouble and sorrow
does not mean that there's something wrong
between us and God,
that we are not lacking in faith.

And that is the extra piece of trust,
when it's between God and us:
faith.

Our children's story [gospel reading] this morning
was about Peter walking on water;
or perhaps, more accurately,
it was about Peter walking on water
and then being fished out of the water by Jesus,

when he started to sink.

Trust got Peter out of the boat,
and trust had him crying out to Jesus,
“Lord, save me”
when his faith wobbled and he started to sink.

Trust had Elijah ticking off kings and trekking tens of miles from place to place,
trusting that God would be there,
trusting that God would direct, provide, do incredible things,
trusting that God would come through for him
in impossible ways
and in impossibly bleak circumstances,
again and again and again.

I suppose I should apologise,
because there’s no simple happy ending to this particular message.
Although I guess if life was always simple and happy,
we wouldn’t need to trust God at all.

Very often, for us, things will look okay for a bit,
be simple and happy,
and then everything will go a bit wrong, again.
In Christ, God has come through for us big time,
and in a permanent way
when it comes to forgiveness and grace,
comfort and direction for today
and hope for the future.

Our biggest and most damaging trouble is dealt with,
forever, for us,
in a way that it hadn’t been for Elijah.

Like Elijah, though,
our ordinary, day-to-day lives are lived
in a world that’s broken,
a world where trouble and hardship and sorrow
inevitably come,
usually not as single spies
but in battalions.

The good news is that we can trust God;
God always comes through for us,
and he always will,
as often as we are in need,

again and again
and again.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.