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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/11/2012, Pentecost 24B
1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44
Grace behind the Scenes

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I mean to focus this morning on our First Lesson, from 1 Kings 17: the story of the poor widow of Zarephath. The thing that pleases me so much about this story is the *grace* behind-the-scenes of it all. Things were better for the poor widow of Zarephath than she knew, and in the end, she lived to see it. Before Elijah showed up at her door, she had reason to think that she was abandoned, bereft, and neglected, with no one in the world to care for her or even to spare a thought for her. As far as she could tell, the future held nothing for her except a handful of meal, a small cruse of oil, a few sticks, and the heartbreak of a final meal with her son. But it was not true. Why, the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, cared for her, and behind the scenes, was preparing both salvation and a great ministry of mercy for that woman. Here, then, is my text for this morning's sermon:

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah], ⁹“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, *I have commanded a widow* there to feed you.” (1 Kings 17:8-9, RSV)

Times were tough, and getting tougher. What the widow in our story did not know, nor could even have guessed, was that the LORD, the God of Israel, regarded her with great affection. He kept his eye tenderly upon her, meant to save her, and was preparing an important ministry for her. Indeed, though the widow did not know it at the time, the Lord had “commanded a widow there”—her!—to feed the prophet Elijah. All around her was collapsing, yet the LORD upheld her in his mighty arms. In the end, this poor widow was able to see the goodness of the LORD.

A drought afflicted the land. The brook, for example, that sustained Elijah had withered and perished because there was no rain to replenish it. No doubt many other springs of water had dried up too. Altogether, this awful drought lasted three years and six months,¹ with desperation increasing as the people's strength decreased.

¹ Luke 4:25.

AHAB AND BAAL

It so happened that there was *someone to blame* for this misery. It was Ahab, the king of Israel. In the eyes of the LORD, Ahab was the worst king ever, for he introduced a false religion into the land. The problem with a bad king is the harm done to the faith and spirit of the people.

The God of Israel and of the Church is what the Bible calls a “jealous God.”

For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God. (Deuteronomy 4:24, KJV)²

This is not a matter of the LORD’s ego. It is not that his feelings are hurt if his people give their hearts to some other god. This is a different kind of jealousy from that which afflicts us human beings. The LORD’s jealousy is a reflection of his profound love. It is entirely directed toward the welfare of his people. The LORD, then, is jealous of those other gods because they are pretenders—not gods at all—and the LORD knows that the people are going to get hurt in the process! Those other gods are as unreliable as a house built on sand, as puffs of fog evaporating in the morning sun. The problem with those other gods is that they are going to let the people down. They are unworthy of the loyalty of the people. Hearts given over to the idols are hearts that are laying up treasure on earth where “moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.” (Matthew 6:19, KJV) The human spirit is always disappointed in the end and degraded when it worships false gods.

In today’s story, the LORD is especially mad about a god called “Baal.” Baal was a fertility god.³ He was a god of the rain, thunder, fertility, and agriculture. If rains came in due season, and if things flourished, the priests of Baal claimed credit for it. But it was all a deceit. Rain comes from the hand of the LORD, the God of Israel and of the church.

The thing that made King Ahab such a bad king is that he introduced the worship of Baal into Israel. Ahab had sprung from a bad tree. His ancestor kings had been bad too, but the LORD considered Ahab to be the worst of them all. If there is anything good we can say about Ahab, I think it would be this: what he did, he seems to have done for love. He loved his wife, Jezebel. But from the Bible’s point of view, it cannot be said that “love justifies all.” Ahab loved, yes, but he loved the wrong person, for in loving Jezebel, he ending up hurting the

² Also Exodus 20:5, 34:14, and so on.

³ Tremper Longman III in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), page 230.

faith of the flock for which he was shepherd. The Bible summarizes the life of Ahab this way:

³⁰Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. ³¹And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. ³²He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1 Kings 16:30, NRSV)

The LORD, then, the God of Israel, could not abide that his people should worship Baal. So, the Lord set about disproving Baal. The course of action was straightforward: If Baal claimed to be the god of rain, then the LORD—the true God of rain— would withhold the rain. The priests and prophets of Baal could then pray and dance and appeal all they want, but Baal will be shown to be false.

The miserable thing about this scheme is that the king, Ahab, makes a royal decision to introduce Baal worship in Israel, the true God of Israel disproves Baal by withholding the rain, the people suffer terribly, while King Ahab and his staff sit around in the palace eating and drinking imported food and wine.

Meanwhile, the poor widow of Zarephath goes hungry. It is as if she gets swept away in the contest between the LORD and the pretender to the throne, Baal. For the LORD carries the conflict right into the homeland of Baal. Jezebel and her Baal worship came from the land called Sidon. That's where Zarephath is—in the land of Sidon. So, the LORD withholds the rain, not only in Israel, but also in the very homeland of Baal. But again, the poor widow and her son suffer in the process.

THOU ART THE WIDOW!

What I find fascinating in this story is the divine dimension of it all. From the point of view of earthly events, the famine is just another of this world's miseries. The weather report is ominous day after day: no rain again today. Likewise, from the point of view of individual biographies, the widow of Zarephath and her son are but two more in a multitude of suffering folks. Who could blame her for feeling that neither the LORD nor Baal cares much about her and her poor son? But as the story plays out, we find that the LORD did indeed care about her, and ended up saving both her, her son, and the prophet

Elijah along the way. It is a kind of foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God, when all will at last be set right.

I love this story because I am not simply interested in the poor widow and her son. Also I am interested in you and me. Who is the widow in our modern world? Thou art the one! Who knows all the details of your present circumstances? Your life might be in chaos, with few suspecting it. Your health, your happiness, your prosperity—all might be under assault for you now. It is as if you are trudging on as best you can through a three-year famine of good news. Your life is being blasted.

But as little as the LORD overlooked the widow of Zarephath, so little does he overlook you. She did not know of the LORD's saving plans for her, but she lived to see them. It shall be the same for us. This is what I firmly believe: Our Triune God is well able to cause all things to work together for good to those who love him. Like the spiritual song goes:

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me!

There an inexhaustible store of flour and oil ahead for us. Aye, and there are ministries of mercies awaiting us, as there were for the widow who ministered to Elijah of old.

I firmly believe this and invite you to trust it too, for just as God commanded the widow to care for Elijah, so did God command His Son to care for us. The widow gave her last bit of food for Elijah's sake, another poor widow gave her last coins out of devotion to God, but our Lord Jesus gave his very life for you and me – the greatest gift of all – once for all. And maybe, just maybe, God is even now commanding you and me to care for someone who is in need. Keep your eyes open, then, for Elijah. Be attentive to the opportunities that God puts in front of you. Remember the widow of Zarephath who gave away all that she had, and in the end, received more than she ever could have expected.⁴

Now we too come to receive more than we have a right to expect – even a sure token of the true God's gracious goodness and everlasting love in the Blessed Sacrament of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

⁴ This important paragraph comes from my wife Carol's sermon for this morning. It gives the crucial Christological grounding for faith in our God's loving work behind the scenes of our daily life.