

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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God Will Provide

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

My main text comes from our First Lesson – the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. I begin with the last verse of our reading. It speaks of victory. It means survival for the poor widow and her son:

¹⁶The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD which he spoke by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:16, RSV)

If you should like a title for this morning's sermon, I am inclined to use the words of one of the precious promises of the Bible – a promise that has sustained many people of faith in times of uncertainty: "God Will Provide." This promise comes from the story of Abraham and Isaac, when the young man said to his poor father,

Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? (Genesis 22:7, KJV)

All Abraham can think to say to his son is his great testimony of faith, "God will provide."

Likewise, if the poor widow in this morning's story should wonder to herself, "If I share my last bit of food with this stranger, Elijah, what shall become of my son and me?" -- I wish someone could speak to her of God's love for the widow and the orphan and the weak ones of this world. I wish someone could share father Abraham's cry of faith: "Dear lady, do not grieve. God will provide! He will provide for you and your son."

So that is my theme this morning: God will provide. He will provide for you. He will provide for me. Let's think about the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and of God's provision for those in need.

We begin with the calamity in the land: a drought and famine that has been raging for two years now. King Ahab is to blame. In the pages of sacred scripture, we read this terrible judgment on the man:

³⁰And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him... ³³And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him. (1 Kings 16:30,33, KJV)

Ahab might have been a good king, but he made a poor prophet. The true prophet in those days was Elijah, not King Ahab. Ahab brought strange worship into the land – worship of the false god Baal. Ahab himself might have loved the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He might have put his head down on the pillow each evening believing that he was a true and faithful Israelite. But meanwhile he combined worship of the LORD with worship of Baal. He reared up an altar to Baal, he built a house to Baal in Samaria, he made a grove to Baal. He seems to have thought that the worship of the Lord could have room in it for the worship also of Baal.

But the LORD, the God of Israel, is a jealous God. He will not tolerate false gods because he knows that in the end, those false gods will let his people down. Baal claimed to be the god of fertility, the god of rain in the springtime, rain at the needful times. Well, the LORD showed King Ahab that Baal was a pretend god. But in showing Ahab that Baal was false, the people suffered. They suffered because the LORD overruled Baal in the very area of Baal's claim to fame: the LORD overruled Baal's claim to bring the rains, with the result that a great drought came upon the land. King Ahab had his way. He insisted upon his way even in opposition to the Lord's true prophet in those days, Elijah. But in having his way, King Ahab's people suffered.

So did the people of Zarephath, a Phoenician town near the Mediterranean. That's where the widow and her son live – the frail people in this morning's story.

It could well trouble us to ponder the plight of this woman. Even in our modern world, there are starving people who could say the same thing as this poor widow:

¹²And 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 cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

A small fire, a little bread: a final meal for these poor ones. It is an image of exhaustion. Her human strength has run out. Not only will she starve, but so will her son. She has done what she can, but now there is no one to help, unless the LORD helps.

Such human exhaustion comes our way: The college student has a final semester to try to pull it together and improve his grades, improve her grades, else the scholarship is forfeit. Meanwhile, mother and father have sent the last of their money to the college. Their savings are gone, their New York Saves Account is empty. Even if the student can improve his grades, it is probably going to be the last semester anyway.

Or, the young man who has made mistakes is facing a third strike. If he commits another crime, his days of freedom are running out. But he runs with a bad crowd. Things are not looking good for him.

Or the elderly person has developed the death rattle. Medicine has done what it can. A final breath will soon be here.

I felt I had to lift up the words of Abraham, “God will provide.” It had to be Abraham’s words, because I can think of no greater, faltering, words of faith than his. There stands Isaac before him – the son of his old age, the wondrous son of Sarah’s old age, the very gift of God meant for the blessing not only of Abraham’s descendents but of all the nations and of all the world. Isaac! His own son. And now he is off to Mount Moriah to slay his son and to reduce his son to ashes.

The boy turns to his father and asks him:

Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? (Genesis 22:7, KJV)

The horrifying truth is this: “My dear son, you are the lamb for a burnt offering! It is the command of the LORD, and I must obey.” But Abraham can not bring himself to say that. Rather, he gives that promise that has sustained so many people over the years: The Lord will provide.

Martin Luther speaks of the “contradiction” in which Abraham stands. Luther says this:

Here God is clearly contradicting Himself; for how do these statements agree: “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Gen. 21:12) and “Take your son, and sacrifice him”? He does not say that some bandit would come and secretly carry off his son; for in that case Abraham could have continued to have hope concerning the life and return of his son. But he himself is commanded to do the slaying... (LW 4:92)

So the son asks about the lamb, and all Abraham can think to answer is, “God will provide.”

Now Elijah says a similar thing to the poor widow of Zarephath. There she stands, thin from hunger, with a mother’s natural love for her son, but without resources any more to take care of him.

Yet she is a human being. She is one of that vast multitude who was supposed to have been blessed through Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. She is one of that vast multitude for whom Jesus died. And so in her story, we see an image of our story too: God shall provide.

And so it was:

¹⁶The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD which he spoke by Elijah.

This morning's story of the widow of Zarephath is a living image of what is in store for each of us. Our God has capacities that go far beyond our own. When we are exhausted and every human resource is depleted and prison or poverty or even death is at hand, nonetheless God will provide! Only God can make such promises. Only God can say such bold things as this to the church, even to frail, faltering churches:

¹⁸And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18, KJV)

In spite of it all, Isaac lived! God did provide. In spite of it all, Jesus lives! And in the resurrected life of Jesus, God provides eternally for you, for me. Sometimes we do reach the end of our rope. If the Lord carries, we will all reach the end of our rope one day. But it makes a world of difference to know that what happened to the widow of Zarephath remains a possibility for each of us. When we cry out for help, we should cry for immediate help -- for plain, practical help that we can see and understand. We should follow the example of Jesus in Gethsemane and pray most earnestly for the passing of this cup from us. But also, we can confidently end our prayers as Jesus did, with his great words of submission, "Not my will, but thine be done," because the will of the Lord that shall in fact be done is a good will. We shall know it one day and give thanks to God, for we too will be able to give our great testimony: God did provide! through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.