

**"Using What You Have on Hand"**  
**Text: Psalm 146; I Kings 17:8-16**  
**The Reverend Joanna M. Adams**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
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*...he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."  
I Kings 17:11b*

When I began my studies at Columbia Theological Seminary, over thirty years ago, my first Bible course was on the Elijah and Elisha stories in I and II Kings. I chose that course because I was required to take a Bible class that first semester and because the I and II Kings course was the only one that met in the evenings. I needed an evening class because we had two little children, and I had to wait until Al got home to take care of the kids. The professor was a visiting Scotsman who made the ancient texts leap to life. I felt as if I had died and gone to heaven.

When the Elijah and Elisha stories showed up in the lectionary cycle for this summer, I decided that it was time for me to be re-introduced to two of my old friends. We will take a break next week in honor of Father's Day, but then for the next several Sundays, we will learn about Elijah and Elisha and what their God, the Holy One of Israel, called Yahweh, was up to in the Northern Kingdom, when Ahab of the House of Omri reigned, and miracles were happening morning, noon and night.

One way to look at the work of Elijah and Elisha is to see that they took the side of the oppressed, common people against the more powerful. Another way to look at what the prophets did is to say that they were on God's side in a contest for the soul of the nation. Would the king and people remain faithful to Israel's God or would they follow Baal, the god of nearby Sidon, where Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, was born? Elijah and Elisha were on the side of the one true God of Israel. They stood up for what they believed. They spoke truth to power. Their legacy invites us to ask ourselves in a vastly different context, but nevertheless, the same question: Whose side am I on? Who really is my God? Can anyone tell by how I live or how I make my ethical decisions, or how I participate in my professional life, could anyone tell which God I serve?

A word about Elijah, who comes before Elisha. At the Jewish observance of Passover, the Seder meal, there is always a chair left empty for the prophet Elijah on

the chance that he will show up. If he did, it would be a very good thing because he is the harbinger of the coming of the Jewish Messiah. The end of the age is about to occur, and everything is going to turn out all right. The children check the wine cups on the table to see if perhaps Elijah has left a few drops of wine.

In the New Testament, Elijah's mighty acts are referred to often. He is understood to be the Old Testament precursor for Jesus the Messiah. He is present at the Transfiguration, representing all the other Old Testament prophets. In Roman Catholic tradition, Elijah holds a particularly interesting place. There are only two people believed to have not actually died before they went to heaven. The first is Elijah who, as you will hear later in the Book of Kings, is said to have ascended into heaven in a whirlwind and riding in a chariot of fire. The other person that the Catholic Church maintains never died is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had to be without sin in order to bear a sinless Jesus. For the Catholic Church and for many of the New Testament writers, death was understood to be the result of sin, so she is said to have been "assumed" into heaven while living.

During Jesus' death on the cross, which came as a consequence of the sin of others, some of the onlookers wondered aloud if Elijah would come and rescue him. Elijah is a giant among religious giants and has been so for 3,000 years. I hope you will enjoy coming to know this prophet of the Lord in the next few weeks. In Hebrew, his name means *My God Is the Lord*. His name succinctly expresses how he understood his life mission.

I thought the other day about a doctor friend of mine, who in the early '90s was into Indian and New Age things. She told me that what I needed was to adopt an Indian name that would express my life mission. She was a physician; she had chosen a name for herself, a name that meant *Heals Many Wounds*. I thought about it for a week or so, and the only thing that I could come up with for myself was *Talks A Lot*, so I decided to stick with *Joanna*.

Elijah, *My God Is the Lord*, appears suddenly during the reign of a king named Ahab of the House of Omri. Ahab was not a very good man; he was promoting the worship of Baal, the fertility god of the Canaanites. He also liked a goddess named Asherah; he permitted the building of sacred poles for the worship of Asherah – I don't know what a sacred pole is, but suffice it to say, Elijah didn't like that kind of thing very much.

Elijah was a Tishbite, and no one knows where Tishbe is. The point is that he was an unknown person, from nowhere important. All of a sudden, just like that, he

appears on the scene. He walks right up the front steps of the palace and announces to the king, "As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand; there will be neither dew nor rain for the next years, except by my word."

Talk about chutzpa! Right into the face of the most powerful man in the land, Elijah says- I know you think I'm standing before you, but I'm really standing before God who is Lord of all, including YOU, and the Lord and I are in charge of the weather, and we will BE in charge of the weather from now on and YOUR gods and goddesses will NOT be in charge of the weather. You think that Baal and Asherah are the gods of storm and rain, but you are barking up the wrong prayer pole! Thank you and goodbye.

The word of the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him to go hide in a wadi, east of the River Jordan – that was very good planning on the Lord's part, because Ahab was probably ready to put Elijah's head on one of those prayer poles. A wadi is a river bed that stays dry except during rainy seasons. There was no danger of Elijah's drowning, if he was hiding in the wadi, since the drought was on. There was just enough water for Elijah to drink and stay alive. Yahweh instructs ravens to feed Elijah while he is hiding.

What we have here is a faithful prophet who takes a risk, who bets his life Yahweh is indeed the Lord of all, and because he trusts God completely, he is rewarded miraculously with food and drink in the midst of famine and drought.

When the water in the wadi dries up, the Lord moves on to Part 2 of his "Save Elijah to Save a Nation" plan. "Now I want you to go to Zarapeth, (which is across the border from Israel, the place where Jezebel is from and where nobody, and I mean nobody, worships the God of Israel). I want you to go over there, and I have commanded a widow who lives there to take care of you."

There probably was an easier way for the Lord to keep Elijah alive, but the point was to show that even in the most unlikely place, the Lord, whom Elijah serves is sovereign. Elijah went and sure enough, there was a widow gathering sticks. "Bring me a little water in a cup so I can drink, (I wish he had said please when he asked for the water, but he didn't) and he said, "While you're at it I'd love a morsel of bread."

Now, the really poignant story is revealed. It turns out that the drought that Elijah has announced is affecting the lives of real people all over the region. The widow, who was as marginalized a person as you could be in that culture, says, "As the Lord your God lives, (Yahweh wasn't her god, but she respected that maybe his God did

live), I don't have any bread baked, but I have a little meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug and I am gathering these sticks..."

Did you hear why she was gathering the sticks? So she could go home and build a fire for her and her son, and they could eat, and then die! Elijah refuses to allow her human words to be the last word, because he is convinced that God is not through with the situation.

He says, "Go ahead and do as you said, but first bake me a little cake, and then make some cake for your son and yourself, for the Lord says the jar will not be empty; the jug will not fail, until the Lord sends rain on the earth." She did what she was told, and sure enough, the three of them and all the members of the household, ate for many days. They were blessed with abundance throughout the drought.

So, what can we learn from this odd, ancient story that introduces us to Elijah? Here are a couple of things I see. The first is that God is operative in all situations of life; in good times and in bad times, God's sovereign will is at work. Clearly the writer of I Kings and Elijah himself believed that God withheld rain or sent rain at God's good pleasure. The point was not so much precipitation. The real question was: Who is the Lord of all of life? Not even the kings of earth can ultimately thwart the will of God. The miracles in the story, the jug and the jar that just won't quit, are the most revealing signs of the life-preserving, life-restoring nature of God. No matter how dire things appear, the word of God is that which still sustains the world.

Have you prayed for rain this summer? I have. I pray for rain everyday. I am worried about my lawn, but even more I am worried about the livelihood of thousands of farmers and families. I am worried about dying crops and cattle. I pray for rain. I pray for God to act in human affairs. I pray for God to heal people who are sick, not because I expect unnatural courses of events to unfold, but because I trust God. I trust God to be faithful to his nature of unending love. I trust God to be on the side of life and not death. I do not understand how God works all the time or much of any of the time, but I do know that God is at work all the time. The God I know in Jesus Christ, and the God I see revealed in the Bible is on the side of life and is committed to the care of all. That is why I pray for rain. That is why I always do my moral and equitable check up by asking myself as often as I can, "Do I have some other god that controls my life besides the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, the One revealed in Jesus Christ?"

I also see in this story a very simple and much less complex reality. Can I say it so simply? Be nice to strangers. What if the widow had brushed Elijah off? She, her

son, Elijah and her whole household would have been dead as doornails. People come our way for a reason, and we do not know the reason in advance, so be kind to everybody you can, as often as you can. Do not shut the door to someone in need! Do not shut the door to a stranger, because if you do, you and the other person might miss the blessing, the life-giving nourishment of God. I am not saying be crazy and don't be safe. I am saying that strangers often bring life-giving blessings. At the very least, your mind can be enlightened, your heart enlarged, your horizons stretched, and they just might save your life.

Finally, I see in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, the wonderful reminder that what we have already is going to be enough to see us through whatever we have to deal with, as it was in the New Testament when so many were fed with just the few loaves and fishes the disciple had on hand. Did you notice that in this story, everything is "just a little bit"? There's a little bit of water in the wadi. There's a little morsel of bread in the widow's hand, and the fire, she's going to build- how many sticks is she picking up? Two! You can't build a very big fire with two sticks. You can't make much of a lunch with a handful of meal and a little jar of oil. But what she had on hand, in the cupboard in the kitchen was all she needed, when God got hold of it.

I think of little David and how he used that slingshot in his hand to slay the giant. I think of Moses and the Children of Israel and how he held up that shepherd's staff and parted the vast Red Sea. "What is that you have in your hand?" the Lord asks Moses. "Lift that up." He did, and you know the way the story went. I hope that in your own life you're not sitting around wishing you had something different, or more, than what you have. I hope you see that God has already filled your life with what you need, not only to survive, but even to thrive. Look at your resources in a different light.

God did not send a chuck wagon riding in from far away that day in Zarephath. He told the widow, through the prophet, to use what she had on hand.

Today we've done a Bible Study of the first recorded miracle by the prophet Elijah, but it was not really Elijah's miracle; it was God's miracle, and God is still performing them everyday in your life, in mine, in this little church that is so strong with hope and so filled with trust, believing that God can do anything if we just offer to him what we have on hand.

It's a miracle – life itself. Thanks be to God.