

Wise Women Leading the Way: The Widow's Story - 1 Kings 17:8-24

Norwalk Christian Church, February 23, 2020, Epiphany 6, Year A, (Non-Lectionary Series)

We've come to the end of our Epiphany Worship Series, "Wise Women Leading the Way." This journey has introduced us to a number of wise women, many whose stories we may not know. Women like Vashti and Rahab, Hagar and Sheerah, the builder of cities. They have amazed us with their incredible strength. Women, most of them foreigners to the Israelites, who stood up to the patriarchy of their day, who fought for a better life in spite of great opposition, who resisted and overcame. They are strong, incredible women.

And we've saved the strongest women for our last week. The Widow of Zarephath. Zarephath--we don't know where that is. The author tells us it's in Sidon, which is to say, we're not in Israel. The prophet of God, Elijah, who shows up on the scene in 1 Kings right before this story. The first thing Elijah does is pronounce judgement on the wicked King of Israel, Ahab. Elijah will go on to do mighty things in the name of God, standing up to king time and time again, resisting the worshippers of Baal, and performing great acts of power, the likes of which had never been seen in Israel and would not be seen again until Jesus begins his ministry.

But before all of that, as Elijah is beginning his prophetic ministry, God sends him to a widow, and a foreign widow at that. The prophet of Israel, sent outside of Israel, to help a poor, marginalized widow.

On the surface, she seems weak. Life has been cruel to this widow, and now she will die an even crueler death by starvation. She appears weak. We don't even know her name. But God knows her name. God knows her story. And God sends the prophet Elijah to her. Because God knows--there is nothing stronger than a widow.

To stand up after losing the love of your life, and make a new life. To fend for yourself, waking up every morning to face the grief, grief that becomes more and more familiar but never goes away. You may accomplish much in life, but there is no accomplishment greater than to continue on with life after you lose your spouse. To carry on, and forge a new life--that is incredible. There is nothing stronger than a widow.

And God knows this. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God shows a preference for Widows. It's right there in scripture, time and again.

- Exodus 22:22 - You shall not mistreat any widow.
- Deuteronomy 27:9 - Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the migrant, the orphan, and the widow.
- Psalm 68:5 - Parent of orphans, protector of widows is God in God's holy habitation.
- Psalm 146:9 - The Lord watches over the foreigner; God upholds the orphan and the widow.

- Mark 12:40 - Those who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers--They will receive the greater condemnation.”
- 1 Timothy 1:5 - Honor the widows.
- James 1:27 - Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...

On and on the scriptures go. The test of one's religion--the sign that you have true faith--is that you care for the widows: local and foreigners alike.

So before Elijah will do anything great in his ministry, he will first do the greatest ministry of all and go visit this foreign widow. God will change Elijah by this encounter with her, and her light will lead the way for him to become God's great prophet.

In her book *Fierce: Women of the Bible and their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation*, the Episcopal Priest Alice Connor tells the story of this widow better than I could. She writes...¹

“There was a widow who lived in Zarephath whose only family was her son and whose only food was a little flour and oil. There was a drought on, you see, so all the people around were suffering.... When the famous prophet Elijah passed through town, he saw her collecting sticks. He said, ‘Woman, bring me some water. And some food as well. For God--my God and your God--has said you will feed me.’ I’m not kidding, that’s what he said. Typical. She paused in her stick gathering and said, ‘Sir, I would be happy to help you out on any other day than today. I have so little to eat that my son and I are just now going to go eat it and then die of starvation.’ Elijah, undeterred, said, ‘It will not run out, go and make some little pancakes with the flour and oil, and bring me some. You’ll see what God can do.’

“Seeing that she was planning to die anyhow, the widow shrugged and did what he said. She poured out the little flour she had into a bowl, mixed the last of the oil with it, and poured it onto a griddle. As it browned around the edges, she thought of all the times she’d made these cakes for her husband, all the times he’d embraced her, all the times they’d laugh and argued in this room. Her chest felt tight, so she put her shoulders back and took a deep breath, her eyes wet but not overflowing. She took a pancake to the prophet and returned home to await death with her son.

“Her eye caught on the empty jar of flour. Which wasn’t empty. She snatched up the bottle of oil. Also not empty. How could this be? For days afterwards, the widow of Zarephath was able to feed herself, her son, and the prophet Elijah, who had brought them the possibility.”

¹ Pg 98-99.

What an incredible miracle! Yet...her story isn't over yet. Her salvation is short-lived, for in a matter of days, the widow's son dies of an illness. And we can imagine her pain. That joy, when she realized her final meal would no longer be her last. The hope. She and her son will live! And now, in her arms lay her son, all that she had left. Her joy and love. Her very life, now gone.

"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!" In other words, it would've been better if the "man of God" had never shown up.

But her story isn't over yet. The widow's story is never over. Elijah takes the dead son from the widow's arms, carries him upstairs to his room, lays him on the bed, and--I kid you not, this part is straight from scripture--he lays on top of the dead boy. Gets up. Lays on him again. Gets up. Lays on him, a third time.

The old hymn sings, "The Lord works in mysterious ways..." You can see where we get that idea.

Then Elijah says, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son? O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again."

And the boy wakes up again to life. And the widow rejoices.

Many years later, in the small village of Nazareth, another prophet beginning his ministry stands up in the synagogue before his family and friends, the people he grew up with in this small village, and he reads a text from another prophet, the great prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And they were proud of this boy--Isn't this Joseph's boy?, they said. They couldn't believe what had come of him! But their praise was short-lived, for Joseph's boy kept preaching. "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon."

And the hometown crowd who saw Joseph's son grow up, were so offended by the suggestion that God would send his prophet only to a foreign widow, that they drove him out to the edge of town and pushed him to the edge of a cliff, intending to push the

prophet over to his death. But Joseph's son miraculously passes through the crowd, unharmed.

This last week, the Legislature of the State of Iowa debated a bill that would raise requirements for people on Snap--food stamps. It also set out to require extra burdens on those receiving Medicaid. The food pantries in the area and many who care for the poor, said that these changes would only cause more hurt to our most vulnerable Iowans. People would go without food and healthcare. Widows, potentially starving to death. Sons, getting ill with no promise of healthcare. The most vulnerable in our society, left to fend for themselves. "Honor the widows," scripture says. But these proposed changes dishonor us all.

But people of faith have risen up. And they keep raising up. Because we see that the light of God is shining. And it's shining right on this Widow of Zarephath. We don't know her name, and yet we do. For her name is the name of every widow in our churches and towns, the name of every widow in our communities, and our nation, and in every nation. Her name is the name of every vulnerable person on this planet, who struggle to survive while others, living to excess, cut the only assistance they have left, as they face their final meal.

And they are strong--so very strong--because God has given them strength, Wise women who show us that to whom all the people God could've sent Elijah, God sent him to the prophet to this widow.

This story rises up in scripture as a penultimate story which shines on the very theme of all of scripture--showing us where God's very heart lives.

The widow of Zarephath teaches us in her wisdom that if you want to follow God--if you want to be a nation that fears God, a church that serves God, a disciple that follows after God--then caring for the widows is where that road always starts.

May God forgive us when we ignore the widows and those most vulnerable. Forgive us when we have too much while others do not have enough to live. Forgive us when we pass laws and live in ways that only make their hard lives even harder.

And may we learn from the strength of this widow, that God sees us all--no matter how vulnerable or forgotten we may feel. God sees us, and God loves us. And God provides.

May God provide through us. May it be so. Amen.