

SERMON: I KINGS 16:33 and 17:1-16
THE JAR OF OIL DID NOT RUN DRY

Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. . . And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word."

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink." And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." So she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, 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." And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.'" So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.

"Every day my pa brought home something for us to eat." That quote is from a man remembering his childhood in the 1930's—the years of drought and depression. There were five children in the family. Their dad worked in town for minimal wages. Money was scarce. But every day he managed to come home from town with something for the family to eat. "As children we were never worried," the man said. In similar fashion God provides for His children. "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). In the Lord's Prayer, we humbly ask our Father, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The situation for Elijah in the text was difficult on more than one front. The nation "Israel" had only been a separate nation for sixty years. During the time of King David's grandson, ten of the twelve tribes separated from the rule of David's family and called themselves "Israel." Their first king was an ungodly king. He devoted himself to idols and encouraged his people to do the same. God was not pleased. During the sixty years that followed, the ruling line did not continue through one family. Israel had five different ruling families. There were the eight kings; all were idol worshipers. Two were assassinated, one committed suicide, one was overcome by a rival. The kingship never reached a grandson. Political chaos! The king at the time of this text was King Ahab, often described as the worst king of Israel. His wife Jezebel was a non-Israelite, an idol worshiper. She "sold" Ahab on Baal worship. Together they promoted rank Baal worship. Chaos in the religious scene too! --- Thank the Lord that our nation has not (yet) descended into such a quagmire. Pray that He gives us Christian leaders, and if not Christian leaders, then "moral" leaders. Pray that we may eat our bread and worship Jesus the Savior in peace and tranquility.

The Lord was not happy with King Ahab (nor any of the kings preceding him). The Lord sent Elijah the prophet to confront Ahab. Elijah was not of any great parentage. He was from the "outskirts" of the land of Israel, from Gilead, a region across the Jordan River. His name means "My God is Jehovah." Elijah was God's representative and spoke with God's authority. "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word." (In the end, it would be three years and six months!) I imagine that King Ahab was not accustomed to being addressed like that: "Ahab, the Lord whom you despise will withhold all dew and rain from your kingdom during the next years until He gives me word. Ahab, you are answerable to me, Elijah." It's similar to what Martin Luther once said, "One man armed with the Word of God is more powerful than all the mighty kings, bishops, popes, and councils who do not hold to the Word of God." Elijah's words did not and did not sit well with godless King Ahab. Elijah would now need God's protection every day. And with no rain and food becoming scarce, Elijah would also need God to provide food every day. The Lord did both.

The Lord sent Elijah to the brook Cherith which flows into the Jordan River. The area must have been rugged, a good place to hide. There was water for him from the brook. God sent ravens bringing bread and meat twice a day—ravens are by nature scavengers. It was a rather humbling spot for a man of God to be in, don't you think? He was a "persona non grata" (a man "undesirable") to the king, a man hiding for safety every day lest the ungodly king seize him, a man eating food that animals brought him. Humiliating or not, the Lord provided for this great prophet. Sometimes in life, when you can't make it on your own, your pride will still say, "I can do this." But the truth is you can't. When you need help, don't be too proud to receive it—whether advice and/or assistance for fixing that which needs repairs, for keeping house or home in order, for medical healing, for financial difficulties—especially forgiveness from God in Christ for each day's sins. Elijah, no doubt was humbled to be in such a spot, to hide from the king, to get food from birds, yet, I am quite convinced, he thanked God for it. He ate, He drank, and Ahab never found him. Rely on the help that God provides each day, and rely on those whom He sends.

Things got worse. The brook dried up. Imagine if there were no rain or dew month after month after month. God instructed Elijah to leave his homeland "Israel," which was supposed to be the land of the people of God. God instructed him to go to the neighboring nation of Sidon—Sidon, of all places!—the Baal-worshiping nation where wicked Queen Jezebel's father was king! He was to go to the land of the very false god whose worship he was trying to snuff out! On top of that, he was to go to the house of a poor widow lady! Surely someone a little more glamorous on the social scene would be better, wouldn't it? Are you ever reluctant to associate with those among whom God has placed you, who are not top-drawer society people? The Lord puts you where He wants you to be. In Elijah's case, how could a poor widow lady care for him? In simple childlike faith in the Lord Elijah went forward, whether understanding or not. He knew that the God of forgiveness and life, who promised to send the One to rescue us from all sin, would not mislead him. The same for you; do not turn away from low people in life! Elijah asked the woman for a morsel of bread. She explained that she was preparing the last meal for herself and her son, then then they would die. It was sad. Yet God instructed Elijah to ask her to make a small cake of bread for him first. Why would she? We are not told how she knew, but she knew that he was the prophet of the Lord, the true God. When Elijah said the Lord promised that she would always have enough flour and oil for a little more bread until the rain returned, she trusted the word of the Lord. This was more than trust that He could provide bread, but she trusted that He would be merciful, kind, and forgiving to her. Her allegiance switched from Baal and the Baal people to the Lord and to Elijah His messenger. God had sent Elijah to her house for Elijah's sake and for hers!

Do you trust the Lord like Elijah did, going to the brook and then to a widow lady in Baal worshiping country? Do you trust the Lord like the widow lady did, putting God and God's messenger first, even before her own and her own son's needs? Surely the devil suggested to her that this was foolish and backwards! But the "draw" of the Lord's mercy, forgiveness, help, and love outweighed Satan's lies. Trust the Lord no matter how foolish it looks to sinful logic or to other people. You do not have to steal to support your family. Your our daily bread does not depend solely on your own wits, ingenuity and hard work. The Lord can cause the bleakest of circumstances to prosper. Think of Peter and his fishing companions, "Lord, we fished all night and have caught nothing; but at Your word I will cast out the net." Then they caught so many, the nets began to tear and both boats were settling down into the water! Here, the widow's situation was continually blessed for many days. The bin of flour never went empty, and the jar of oil never went dry.

The same is also true for the jar of the oil of God's forgiveness in Jesus. "His compassions fail not; they are new every morning!" (Lamentations 3:22-23). "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us!" (Psalm 103:12). "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (I Timothy 1:15). The daily supply of flour and oil continued for three years for the widow, Elijah, and her household. The Bread of Life and the Oil of Gladness—salvation in Jesus!—endures lifelong and forever. Whether it's food or forgiveness, your heavenly Father brings to your home every day nourishment for life and eternal life!

The Old Testament prophet Malachi said Elijah would come before the great day of the Lord?. Years later, Jesus identified John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come, who pointed people away from the idols of the world and the idol of self, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—that is, Jesus the Savior. Do you remember when Jesus was on the cross, He cried out "Eli, Eli!"? The Jewish listeners thought Jesus was calling on Eli-Jah. They missed the point. Jesus was calling on His Father saying "Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?" --- "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" God forsook Him, to save you! You can leave this morning confident of His love and mercy which you have in Christ, though you deserve not a whit. In Jesus you too can call out, "My God! My Jehovah!" every day. Let's all add an additional middle name to our identity—Richard Norman "Elijah—My God is the Lord" Kanzenbach. He brings home to you nourishment every day for this life and eternal day!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach--