

Faith in Drought

November 10, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: 1 Kings 17: 8-16

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Beloved community, I am so grateful to see each of you this morning, grateful that we are together, for the blessing that is church and gathering in times of uncertainty and grief, in wilderness times. So, please will you pray with me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

What a week. I know for many of us, this week has been a mountain range of emotions. Bewilderment, rage, hope, fire, confusion, grief, fear, numbness, determination. I know it has been all of these things for me, and honestly, this morning I'm preaching this sermon to myself as much as anyone else who is bewildered in this moment. At the same time, I recognize that there are other beloved children of God – in our neighborhoods, in our families, perhaps in our sanctuary – who are feeling heard and seen as a result of this election, and I want to say at the beginning that while I'm preaching from my experience, I am curious about yours. May God help us all love one another well across lines of difference.

This week, I have heard from people whose children live in states where access to reproductive care has been stripped, and they are worried for their children's ability to access life-saving care if needed. I've heard from people who wonder whether their trans children will be able to get the hormones they need to be well in three months when the administration turns over. There are those of us who are from immigrant families or who deeply love immigrants, and are terrified over what we may be facing in this next season – both the policies from the top and the bigoted behavior from our neighbors. I've heard from gay friends who are revising their wills so that their spouses will be cared for even if the federal right to same-sex marriage is revoked. And I've heard from folks who are bewildered – how is it possible that so many people in our country could vote for someone who is so overt in stoking the fires of racism, misogyny, division, and hatred among us? It's as if we hardly recognize ourselves. Many of us are bewildered – in the sense of confused, but also in the sense of being in the wilderness – without a trail, in unknown territory, unaware of what's around the next bend. It's so easy, in that wilderness of the soul, for fear to fill in the gaps, for our imaginings of the worst possible outcomes to become so habitual that they feel like certainties.

One of the things I love about reading the Bible is that it reminds me that we are far from the first people to face crises, to find our way through the wilderness without knowing what will come. We have a long line of those before us who have navigated fear and uncertainty, who have faced climate catastrophe, who have fought back against leaders who misuse power, who have sought God in the midst of profound suffering.

In our first Bible story this morning from First Kings, we meet the prophet Elijah right as he emerges from his own wilderness experience. It's a time of crisis in the land, brought on by a deep and lasting drought, and Elijah has been living in the wilderness, sustained by a small stream and by ravens who bring him food. When his stream runs dry, the voice of God tells him to go to a particular town, north of Israel, and seek out a widow, whom God has charged with feeding him.

Now, widows in that time were some of the most oppressed members of the community. Without their husbands, they were no longer provided for by the king or by their religious communities, and so they were often forced to become beggars. This story begins, then, with God instructing Elijah to go seek out someone who, particularly in the midst of a devastating drought was unlikely to have many means of economic or material sustenance.

When Elijah finds her on the outskirts of the town collecting firewood, I imagine that they struggle to communicate. The differences between them are a gulf – they speak different languages, though the dialects were similar enough for them to just understand each other. They are from different places, and from vastly different life experiences. Perhaps they feel as alienated from each other as we do, now, from people who voted differently. In the midst of a drought, God has brought two strangers together in common thirst. An interesting beginning.

Elijah asks her first for water, a precious substance in a bone-dry land, and then, just as she's turning away to go get that for him, he adds, "oh, and can you also bring me a morsel of bread?"

Her reaction makes so much sense to me. I can almost see her face – can you picture it? She says, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die."; The desperation of her poverty, of her longing to care for her son in impossible circumstances, the intensity of her fear, the exhaustion of her existence leaps out of her in that moment. She feels this as the last day of her and her son's life – she's almost certain of it – they are starving and there's not nearly enough for a

meal for the two of them, just a measly bit of flatbread baked over the fire, and decidedly not enough for this bold stranger who has sought her out and is asking for her help. Her response to Elijah is full of the certainty of doom – they have not been okay for a long time, she’s tried everything, and here they are, dying of starvation. They will die tomorrow, she believes, because there is nothing left and no one to help.

Elijah’s first words to her are, “do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid. And then Elijah suggests something that seems outrageous – that she take her last bit of flour and oil and feed him, this bold stranger, first, before she feeds herself and her son, and that in that act of faith and generosity, she will see that for the duration of the drought, her stores of oil and flour will never run dry

And in that moment, we see her attachment to the certainty of her doom dissolve into the uncertainty of faith. In choosing to trust Elijah, to meet this stranger with unfathomable generosity, offering up the last of what she has, she becomes God’s collaborator. She doesn’t know how it will work out for her – but she moves forward anyway, and instead of taking the known way forward, the same worn path she’s walked each day of that drought, into the certainty of her and her son’s death, she walks through the door that God has opened for her. She brings Elijah water and the last of her bread, and God, meeting her collaboration, makes a way out of no way, ensuring that she and her son are fed for the duration of the drought.

Now, in times of crisis and chaos, like in this Biblical drought, like in this time of polarization and discontent and fear in our country, it is natural to wonder how God could let something so dire happen. How could God allow this widow and her son to get so close to death? How could God allow a country to get so polarized, for hatred to flourish and be given a national microphone? How could God allow a beloved one to get sick and die an untimely death? We cry out to God in these moments as if God is an all-powerful force who can choose to bless some people and to test or smite others. But that belief becomes maddening, doesn’t it? Because there is no rhyme or reason to it – no reason why one person survives the cancer while another beloved child of God succumbs to it. No reason why one land experiences deathly drought, why that particular woman was widowed and left to become a beggar and not her neighbor. No earthly reason why God would want to expose trans people, women, BIPOC people, immigrants to hatred and danger. I can’t reconcile the story of a loving God who orchestrates all the big moves of human history with the existence of genocide, of slavery, of fascism, of all the ills of human history and present.

There’s a moment I love in the movie *Selma*, Ava Duvernay’s film that tells the story of Martin Luther King and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches. The scene begins in a morgue, with an older Black

father gazing through the glass to where his beloved son lies, having been killed by white state troopers in a protest. Dr. King holds this father's shoulders, and first he says, "there are no words to comfort you, Mr. Jackson." And he goes on, "but I can tell you one thing – God was the first to cry. God was the first to cry for your boy."

What if this story about Elijah and the widow is saying something similar to what Dr. King says in that moment? What if it's telling us a story about a God who doesn't ordain a terrible drought or the murder of Black young people or a social system that oppresses widows, but a more incarnate, emergent God – an Emmanuel, God-with-us – who is the first to cry with us, a God who meets us in the cracks of it all, who opens those cracks wider, who offers us a way out of no way if we're willing to collaborate with them? In other words, what if this story is telling us about a God who, in the context of terrible crisis, meets us in partnership and creativity, ready to move with us to reshape the world, ready to break open the certainty of our doom to the wild possibilities beyond our imaginings?

The theologian Paul Tillich said, "the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty." The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty. When the widow in our story allows the certainty that she and her son will starve to death to dissolve into a willingness to collaborate with God through Elijah, she is practicing faith. This is our job, too, in this time – to practice a faith that is clear-eyed about all we are facing but that refuses the certainty of despair. A faith that looks for the ways God is opening a way and recommits over and over again to collaborating with God.

Beloveds, at its best, that is what church is all about – what we have already been doing and what we will continue to do together in this next season. We collaborate with God to make a way out of no way when we volunteer with Friday café, making sure that our unhoused neighbors have food to eat and loving fellowship to sustain them. We practice that muscular faith when we organize with GBIO – it's not a faith that sits back and waits for God to take care of it, but a faith that believes that God is always wanting to partner us in making a way out of no way, in making God's kingdom on Earth. It requires our collaboration. We practice that kind of faith when we participate in sanctuary movements that ensure that immigrants seeking asylum are safe and cared for. We collaborate with God when we tell the full history of our church, and move through the relational work of reparations, even when we don't know the way. This is what we support with our pledges in this stewardship season, and with our presence in the good work our church is up to. Each day, step by step, our faith calls us to do our small part to resist the certainty of doom and dread, and to look for the ways we can collaborate with a God who offers us, even in the deepest drought, the surprising possibility of sustenance.

In a moment, we will do a couple of things: we will sing a new song together, to remind ourselves that we've got each other, that we are not alone, and that we collaborate with God by collaborating with each other. And then we will spend some time in silence, lighting candles to honor our unique contributions to amplifying God's light of justice and love all over. We will light our candles from each others' flames, because none of us needs to know what to do at every moment; because we are interdependent; because each person doing what is theirs to do to collaborate with God in crisis times inspires another to shine their own light. Step by step, meal by meal, meeting by meeting, breath by breath, prayer by prayer, light by light, last bit of bread by last bit of bread, we are God's collaborators in making a way out of no way in impossible times.

"Do not be afraid," Elijah says. Offer what you have, even if it's very little. Lean on each other when you are thirsty. Seek God in the stranger. Be real about the horror of all we are facing. And then let your certainty about impending doom dissolve into a muscular faith that is willing to collaborate with God to make possibilities that we cannot yet imagine. So it was for Elijah and the widow, and so may it be for us in this season. Amen.

