

The Courage to Have Compassion
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Picture this: a man in a wadi, an arroyo, surrounded by dry earth on all sides. A trickle of water runs by his feet: the last of a seasonal river. The man has hidden there for some time: he and the king are at odds. Day after day, alone, with no one to talk to except hoarse ravens. The man whose pronouncements begin “Thus says the Lord the God of Israel” has no one to pronounce to any more, silenced by exile, kept alive, but barely, during the drought. Then, there is his last meal, his last sip of water. The end. A dead end. The last piece of bread, the last sip of water. No way out, until the voice of God speaks into the silence: “Go now to Zaraphath.”

Picture this: a journey through the blasted land to Zaraphath, on the coast, in Sidon. It’s only a few miles from the hometown of our foreign queen, Jezebel – how could this be safe? At the town gate, fluttering by in her dusty black like a raven, comes a woman, thin and tired. Somehow, though, she is still bound by the customs and obligations of hospitality, and she gets the tired man with the strange accent a pot of water to drink. Why not? Life will not last much longer anyway, in this drought. But then the strange man asks for bread. Now she can’t pretend to be hospitable... except to share her despair. It is the end. A dead end. The last meal for her, and her son.

Listen to this: the strange man, the holy man, says the words of an angel: “Do not be afraid. Fear not.” He gives serving instructions for the last meal: “serve me and then yourselves.” Because God says that this is **not** the end. Each day will have a last meal in it, yes. But day by day, the jar and the jug will be filled. Day by day we will learn to live with the urgency and vibrancy of dependence.

Watch this: a small household of a man, a woman and a child. An unlikely family formed by the word of God. The boy is the light of the household, like a clay lamp lit from within. Each breath he breathes is an assurance from heaven. Watch him regain his strength. Then watch as his breathing stops.

Listen to the raven screech of his mother: “What have you done, why are you here, what have you brought into this house? Are you punishing me for my past sins? How could you take my son?! The miracle bread, our forever last meal, was poison!” And the strange man, the foreigner, the one who should never have come, tenderly takes the child and begins his own prayer of reproach to God. “Wasn’t the drought enough? Wasn’t my exile enough? Hasn’t there been enough death already? Bring back the flame of his spirit, relight our household’s lantern, we can’t live without him!”

Watch this: the man comes down the stairs with a living boy and places him in the arms of a sobbing mother. She says, “I cannot see your God, but your compassion has made him visible. I cannot hear your God, but your words bear the weight of holy truth. I do not know your God, but you have kept our hope alive with your prayers. Come, another meal is waiting.”

“Do not be afraid,” said Elijah, when confronted with a starving mother. “Do not weep,” says Jesus, when confronted with a grieving mother. Because these words are in the Bible, we take them as a formulaic pronouncement from holy men or angels. But sometimes I have to listen again, as though I had never heard these words before, and I think, “How dare they? How dare they tell these women in such distress and despair, so far beyond ordinary pain, **not** to feel what they feel? Isn’t that insensitive, on some level? Isn’t it dismissive?”

We ponder the stories of the two nameless widows who encounter God’s grace. Widows in ancient societies often are numbered among the poorest of the poor because in patriarchal societies they had no man to provide for them and protect them. Their sons were their life insurance policy. God places Elijah and Jesus with these women at the bottom of the social heap. And this places them in opposition to those at the top, in power. The bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, in a book about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, describes this as a concept of “otherwise.” He says that these prophets break into the history of the kings leading up to and including Ahab: a long narrative of war and unfaithfulness and idolatry and injustice. Then comes Ahab and his foreign queen Jezebel, who “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who went before” them, as it says in chapter 16. In the verses just before today’s reading, we even hear of human sacrifice as the rebuilder of the city of Jericho buried his sons under the foundations and gates of the city. What a profligate spending of human life, contrasted so poignantly with the care of a widow to keep her one child alive. The prophets of God see all this and speak and act “otherwise,” daring the people to imagine a world based on a different foundation.

They do this in two ways. One is to confront the king and queen at the royal court and the magnificent temples and *speak* “otherwise.” This takes a particular kind of courage, as Elijah learned over and over, running away from royal soldiers and the priests of Baal. It takes the courage to stand up and speak loudly, where everyone can hear, and say, “This is wrong. This is unjust.” And Elijah, and later Jesus, were willing to do that.

But our stories today speak of another way to get to “otherwise.” It is to enter into the experience of desolation, to partner with those in pain. This takes the kind of courage that we cannot sustain without deep spiritual reserves of trust and hope.

Walter Brueggemann also wrote, “When the early church pondered Jesus, cadences of Elijah rang in their ears because they sensed that Jesus was an enactment of a dangerous, healing, liberating otherwise that could not be stopped.”

When people encountered Jesus, they were reminded of Elijah, particularly in those worst of times, when people were desolate and empty. Those two widows were emptied out by the ravages of life. Nothing was left but empty space, into which a prophet, one who knew what hunger and pain and loss felt like, could speak. Nothing was left – but into their hollowed-out lives, compassion, the true compassion of shared sorrow, could begin to move and grow.

Sometimes I wonder whether we allow ourselves that kind of space and that kind of courage and that kind of compassion. Do we surround ourselves with so many things and activities and entertainments and noise and worries that we block ourselves off from the pain of others and the grace of God? Perhaps we are all hungry, or starving, deep down in our souls, but we fill ourselves with spiritual junk food. Then there is no room for a prophet to speak, or good news to be heard. We are afraid to learn day by day to live with the urgency and vibrancy of dependence.

Our two readings today were paired by the creators of the 3-year lectionary cycle because they have similarities of widows with only son. They have similarities of miracle. So there is logic in putting them together. But there is no logic in the actual stories: in fact some may find them painful. I had to gather up my courage, in some ways, to even dare to preach on miraculous exceptions to the rule of death, because we have all been touched by tragedy when the rule was not broken, when prayers seemed unanswered, when loved ones died. We can read these stories, we can picture the settings, listen to the conversations, and feel the pain, but our own lives do not usually include miraculously filled grain jars or oil jars, or sons raised from the dead. Elijah and Jesus are not here with the life-giving breath or the holy touch.

It seems to me that the church is the one place where we can tell such stories with integrity. The worship service is the one time when empty places can be experienced as a place where compassion grows. The communion service, when we remember what we call the Last Supper, should be the one act that brings us into deep solidarity with every widow and every one whose larder is bare and everyone who cries out for justice and love. It is always the last meal, as it was for Elijah and the widow and her son and for Jesus, but when we taste the bread, we dine with them again.

Here we can recognize, that each one of us has losses to mourn and challenges to face. As the Jewish Philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." Or a little closer to our own time, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each one's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

So, take heart. Have courage. Fear not. Do not weep. Picture this: a community whose communal heart is empty enough for hope, peace and love to enter in. Listen to this: people telling with their lives stories of "otherwise." Watch this: an unlikely household formed by the word of God. Taste this: the last sip and morsel, a promise of life to come. Amen.