

GIFTS BEYOND MEASURE!
24TH Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Steven D. Spencer - Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church

1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the LORD came to him, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now 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 first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

I. INTRODUCTION

My mom was an expert at stretching meals. I'm one of 4 boys and we use to have friends stay over for dinner all the time. We would ask, "Mom is it alright if someone stays for dinner?" The answer would always be, "Sure, I can make it stretch". Typically, one of my brothers would be asking the same question just moments later. I grew up thinking meat loaf only contained 10% meat and that spaghetti was only sauce colored noodles. But we all ate and felt full. If someone was visiting your house at dinner time would you invite them to stay?

Denise and I often cook meals that will last 2 or 3 days. It saves time and money by cooking this way and I know some of you do the same thing. Each day you have to control how much you eat knowing you will have the same amount the next night and the night thereafter. If you budget your meals for 3 days and someone stopped by, would you invite them to stay for dinner? Would you give up one of your day's worth of meals? By the way, what usually happens is they eat the same portion as you and then ask for more. That means you don't even have 2 days worth of meals anymore. Knowing that can happen would you still invite them to join you?

Let's go a little further with our discussion. I know some of you have lived in some very challenging times in your lives, so have we. Maybe you've had to count every slice of bologna to see if it would make it to the end of the week. And the bologna you were counting wasn't for lunch. Maybe you've had to eat popcorn for dinner. Without butter! Imagine for a moment you are down to your last piece of bologna and someone knocks on the door. Would you invite them to stay for dinner?

That's the type of situation for the widow in our Old Testament reading. She was down and out. She is living through a famine caused by a terrible drought. Normally the family, the dead husband's relatives would have provided for her. But as we see in our text, no one is coming to her aid. She has been living on survival rations and the food is finally running out. The end is near. I'm sure she has been praying for an answer or for help. "Lord send someone to save me, Lord send me food", probably something like that. Now enters Elijah into the picture.

II. ELIJAH THE ANSWER TO PRAYER

Elijah has been sent by God to tell King Ahab, the king of Israel, that because of his sin, there will be a terrible drought in the land until the Lord says otherwise. You might remember Ahab's wife, a woman named Jezebel. The drought will last for years; and with it, there will be famine and starvation. After preaching this Word, Elijah hides at a brook as directed by God until the drought makes it run dry; after that, the Lord sends him to a town called Zarephath. By the way, Zarephath is between Tyre and Sidon in the land of Phoenicia not in Israel. It is the place of the mortal enemies of the Israelites and where the family of Jezebel dwells.

Please notice one important lesson right off the bat. Wickedness, that is sin, causes collateral damage. Did someone from Zarephath cause great offense against the Lord? No, not to say there weren't sinners there. But it was the wickedness of the King of Israel and his wife that caused the drought. Bad things happen to good people because of other people's sin. Bystanders often receive collateral damage.

We find the widow gathering sticks to make a fire; and with that fire, she is going to use the last of her flour and oil to bake some bread. Once that is gone, there is no more food. She believes, she and her son are about to die. She doesn't seem angry or bitter at the event; it is just the way it is. She believes in God and this must be His will.

But then Elijah arrives, he calls to her and asks for a cup of water. This is a minute request but remember that there's a drought and water is scarce. Still, the woman goes to get some; but before she can, Elijah has another request: ***"Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."*** Here, the compliance stops as she explains, ***"As the Yahweh your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now 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."*** It's an accurate description: there's no food, and where there's no food, death follows. That is life and death in this sinful world; and that is what she sees.

Here's this woman, who has been praying for a miracle. "Send me a savior, send me food". And now this man shows up asking for water and her last crumbs. Remember John the Baptizer he was patterned after Elijah. What did John wear? He wore a camel's hair coat and a leather belt. Nothing fancy! Imagine this dirty, weather beaten man, wearing a camel's hair coat and leather belt showing up and saying, give me food and drink. Oh and by the way, God sent me.

But faith trusts in what it does not see. Faith trusts in what it hears from God. So the prophet speaks the Word of God to the widow: ***"Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'"***

The natural reaction would be disbelief, unbelief. Put yourself in her shoes: you've got one meal left during a famine, and a stranger appears and tells you that God said to give it to him instead. But by faith, the woman trusts the Word that Elijah speaks, and the Lord keeps His Word. She feeds Elijah; and lo and behold, there's enough food left for her and her son. Not just for that day, but for many days. The Lord always keeps His Word: in times of plenty and in times of want, the Lord always keeps His Word.

III. THE WOMAN AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

God sent Elijah to the woman in Zarephath that she might be fed. But Elijah needed food too. Through the faith of the woman and God's blessing Elijah was fed and her son was fed. Because of sin innocent people are hurt, that's the first lesson. The second lesson is this, because of the faith of others, bystanders often receive collateral blessing. God sent Elijah to the woman so he would be fed. She was an answer to his prayers. The woman was fed because Elijah was there. He was an answer to her prayers. He

stayed there 2 years. Her provisions would not run out until rain returned. The Hebrew understanding of rain returning is not just showers but the effect of those showers, Harvest, Food, Plenty.

God uses His servants, prophets, preachers, teachers etc... to feed believers and He uses believers to feed the prophets, the preachers, the teachers in other words His servants. It still works that way today.

IV. GOD'S WORD AT WORK

Where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. You saw this in the text: Elijah spoke God's Word, and the flour and oil didn't run out. The household stayed alive throughout the famine. But if the woman rejected the prophet his word would not have been at work there. Likewise, God continues to provide daily bread for you today; and while you do not hear Him speak outside of Scripture, you know that He creates by speaking. He provides daily bread ultimately by His Word.

Where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen because God is at work. Do not dismiss the miracle that happens here. The Lord speaks, and sin and death are removed far from you: He says it is so, because He has gone to the cross and died in your place. This is a far greater miracle than the one at Zarephath, because this is about eternal life and death. The Lord spoke at your Baptism and sent the devil scampering away as He clothed you in His own righteousness. He speaks His Absolution and gives you everlasting life. He speaks at the Supper to give you His own body and blood in bread and wine; and far better than the wonder bread of Zarephath, He declares, ***"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."***(John 6:51).

You were in far worse shape than the widow at Zarephath, she knew her hunger: but you were once dead in your sin, but too blind to know it. But by the grace of God, His Word has reached your ears. And where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. Now you have life. Now you know that, for Jesus' sake, God doesn't hold your sins against you. Now you know that death might be terrible from this side, but it's no match for your Savior who went to the cross and conquered death for you. ***Death is swallowed up in victory "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*** (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55)

Rejoice, dear Christian friends. The Lord continues to speak His Word. And where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. It was true in Zarephath. It is true here: for the ***Gifts Beyond Measure*** are the grace and eternal life, the miracles wrought by God for the sake of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for you. And so these miracles of grace and life are given to you by the Lord's miraculous Word...for you are forgiven for all of your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.