

1 Kings 17:8-16  
*The Eagles are Coming*  
Rev. Jonathan Cornell  
10-26-14

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If I were to tell you, right there, where you sit, with whatever you brought with you to church this morning, you were fully equipped to be God's transformative agent for kingdom mission, would you believe me? If not, why not?

I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles, either the one we've made available for you or the one you brought with you, to the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. In the red pew Bibles in front of you, it is on page 317 of the Old Testament; in the Bible you brought with you, it comes right after 1 Kings 16. This morning's story is a story of God's exceeding sufficiency in the face of our poverty, because at one time or another every one of us has felt as though what we have is just not enough for God to use. We've felt as this woman does.

By way of setting up the story... Elijah was a man chosen by God to be a prophet, to speak truthfully to Israel. We are meeting Elijah earlier in his career, at a time in Israel's history when they were in a difficult place—Israel has been disobedient, and God chose to send a famine in the land to get their attention.

This story takes place in a town called Zarephath, which is right across the Jordan River from the capital city of Samaria. You might be thinking, *capital city of Samaria? I thought it was Jerusalem*. At this time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, a northern kingdom whose capital was Samaria, and a southern kingdom, Jerusalem. The division took place after King Solomon, and throughout this era the kings of the land, by and large, did what was evil in God's sight. It would appear that there was only one man left who was willing to lead the people back, and that man was Elijah.

Elijah was a man in whom God entrusted his mission, and what you will see is that mission literally rested upon Elijah's shoulders.

There are moments in history when the mission of God hangs in the balance. In those moments, God uses real people, right where they are, to keep God's Kingdom dream alive. And remarkably, those are regular people like you and like me.

Just before our passage, God tells Elijah to go to Ahab, the king of Samaria, and inform him that because of his wickedness, it will not rain on their land again until God says so. There is going to be a famine in the land for a very long time. And then Elijah leaves and goes out. But then he realizes, "I don't have anything to eat or drink." Do you think he kicked himself? "I should have packed a lunch, or at least thought this through a little more." And that's where we pick up our text today, starting with verse 8...

**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."** What

you need to know about this woman is not a special person. She is not someone who God knows is already a spiritual superstar. She is a regular person like you and me. In fact, what we will come to know is that she is desperately poor—at the edge of death. And the place where she lived was one of the areas that was furthest and most hostile to God. Sidon, where Zarephath is located, is the place where the wicked Queen Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, was from. So it's not as if this widow was one of God's "A-Team players," but Elijah comes to her nonetheless.

Continuing... **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."**

Let's stop there for a moment. At one point or another in our lives, every one of us has known what it feels like to not have enough of what we need to go on. It may be physical, like this woman, or it may be emotional or spiritual. You may have been or be single and alone, and what you long for most is friendship or companionship. It may be the lack of a job and not knowing where to turn next. It may be the very real possibility of our retirement savings running out. Whatever it is, every one of us knows what it is like to face life ahead when it feels like we don't have enough.

And yet, do you see what Elijah says to this woman, who has already said to him, "Stranger, I'm gathering these sticks because this is all we've got left and when it's gone, so are we"? Elijah says to her, "Bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink, and a morsel that I may eat."

There are moments in God's story when it becomes very apparent that the future of God's mission rests in the hands of unlikely individuals.

This is one of the great themes of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. Frodo Baggins and his faithful companion Samwise Gamgee have the fate of Middle Earth resting on their shoulders, and for the most part they make the journey to Mordor alone. Food is scarce, adversity is abundant, and their guidance is uncertain. But the mission of the ring rests with them, and so they give.

Elijah tells this woman, "Listen, the future of God's mission rests in your hands." Can you imagine? Their own lives hang in the balance, and Elijah says, "Give me from your poverty that I may continue."

There are times when all we have is a tiny little something. Maybe you are in a place where all you have is a wounded and hurting heart. And can you imagine God coming to you and saying, "I want that wounded and hurting heart, because I can use it for my mission. I want that miniscule little thing that you have." Maybe it's all you have, maybe

you are at the end of your rope and don't know what you're going to do next. It is in that moment that God says, "That little thing you have, I want you to give it to me because I'm going to use it for my mission."

When Elijah asks this of this woman, she says to him, "This is all we have and when it's gone we will die." And in verse 13, **Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid."**

Let these words sink down into your heart. Don't let your mind trick you into believing you do not have enough to be used by God.

**"Do not be afraid; 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."**

Here Elijah is confronting this woman's need by asking her to take a leap of faith and give even though she literally has nothing to give.

When we are in the place where all we have is our little nothing, when all we have is our need, it is difficult to part with. But this is exactly what God invites her to do, because God can use even our very little to do great things in his kingdom.

I am going to go out on a limb – without any scientific evidence, only my narrow and very limited observation – and say that people who are closer to their need, whose lives hang by a thread, are actually more generous because they know they have little to lose. And people who have lots are perhaps less generous because they have more to lose. That may not be an air-tight argument, but maybe one worth arguing after worship at coffee hour.

If we put before God even the things we lack, our little nothings, God can multiply them for his mission in the world.

There are all sorts of reasons we give God for why we can't get involved in his mission. *My job is too demanding right now, I only have a few precious hours free each week, there are too many previous commitments with school and sports and music and civic engagements.* But look at what the text says. The story of this woman cuts all of our excuses off at the knees as to why we can't get involved in God's mission.

The text says is that if we will give—even out of our deficiency—God will use it and God will bless us, not so that we will have all sorts of luxury and abundance, but that our lives will be full of goodness and overflowing with all we need. Look at verse 15, will you?

**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.**

At the end of that day, the woman went to the jar and went to the jug and prepared the meal, where she and her family and Elijah ate. Then they went to bed, and in the morning went back to the jug and jar, and then again in the evening, and each time they went to the jar and the jug, there was meal and oil and water. And they kept doing this day in and day out. They feasted and toasted each meal as if it were their last, and each day they went to bed wondering if there would any in the morning.

And therein lies a wonderful lesson for us: that in this woman's faith, she had no choice but to trust the provider, and not the provision. This woman could not trust the provision, only the one who kept replacing that little bit of meal and oil and water, with enough for each next meal. A little more and a little more. And do you know, the famine in the land lasted for two years. Two years they did this. Can you imagine the life transforming faith it built in her, this widow and her son literally kept God's mission alive for two years by giving their little nothing, so that God could do all sorts of somethings with it.

If you are in a place where you think to yourself, *all I have is my little, broken and not enough thing*, I want to encourage you that this is the place where you might be called to take the leap.

If all we ever do is work out of our abundance, if we continue to place our trust in the provision and not the provider, if we continue to worry and fret and wring our hands that we will not have enough, if we seek these other things rather than seeking first the kingdom of God, we are in danger of missing the growth God has for us. But if we would seek first the kingdom and his righteousness, then the scripture says, **ALL OF THESE THINGS WILL BE ADDED ALSO.**

What God wanted to teach this woman was that his mission depended even upon her small contribution. But if she was faithful with the little things, God would be abundantly faithful in the big things, all things.

As Frodo and Sam lie, marooned out on an out cropping of Rocks surrounded by a torrential flow of lava, as Mt Doom crumbles around them, it would appear that this was the end of things for them. The quest was complete, these two Hobbits, the least of all in Middle Earth, had done it. They had destroyed the ring.

But no one planned on an exit strategy. Their mission was singular, get the ring to Mordor and destroy it; returning home safely to the Shire was never in the plans. That is, until the eagles show up. The eagles pluck the Hobbits from the rocks and carry them to safety.

The eagles always appear out the blue from time to time to rescue those who are in direst need. But they never materialize as if they are on retainer. They follow no one's schedule. They aren't the Middle Earth version of Delta Air. Rather they're something like divine intervention. When all appears to be lost, suddenly from out of nowhere, grace arrives, and all is found. Tolkien had a word for this unexpected happy ending; he called it a *eucatastrophe*, a disaster becomes a blessing because God was working all along, even

though out of sight.

When we trust in God, God always proves himself trustworthy. And when we pour out our oil and meal, our gifts and our talents, even when it's the very last bit of it we got, God's cup always runneth over. Seeking first the kingdom, being obedient with the little things, even in the midst of despair, we need not fear. Because at a time and place of God's own choosing, the eagles are coming.