

SERMON I Kings 17: 7-16/ Luke 4 *No Boundaries*

A few years ago, a friend of mine, Pam, got to experience something she had always wanted to do- she went skydiving. Skydiving is not something most of us have done because it's risky. In the minutes before Pam entered the plane she got her instructions about what to do and what not to do. Like when it's your turn to jump, you get ready by kneeling at the open doorway. Her guide explained that he would hold her head to the side as they jumped out together because most people tend to jerk their heads back sharply as they jump and he didn't think she wanted to knock him out cold on the way out the door! Later, when her guide tapped her shoulder, she was to put her arms out straight in front of her and her legs and feet out behind her so she would float down to the ground instead of hitting the ground hard and fast. But when it was time to land, her feet were to go out in front of her like she was sitting down- because there's less chance of breaking your legs or ankles that way. Does this sound inviting yet? Finally, she was outfitted with her parachute, and tethered tightly to her guide who told her "Just follow my instructions and leave the rest to me." Then it was time to get on her knees looking out at 14,000 feet above ground. She felt her head pulled to the side, her guide pushed her gently, and out they went! She loved it!

Pam told me the riskiest part was having to trust that the guide knew what he was doing with no guarantees. Life is filled with moments when we are called to trust with no guarantees. Elijah and the widow in today's scripture reading faced such a moment.

Last Sunday we heard the prophet Elijah tell King Ahab that the Lord was sending a drought to test who the people really trusted. God provided Elijah a safe place to wait it out beside a small brook with ravens bringing him food every day. But then the brook dried up, and Elijah faced dehydration and death like everyone else. In today's scripture, the Lord sent Elijah to the city of Zarephath to find a widow who would help him. Zarephath was in Gentile country; in fact, it was in the area of Sidon, Queen Jezebel's homeland. It was Baal country.

There he met a widow gathering wood to make one last fire to cook one last meal of bread and water for her son and herself and then to quietly die together. She wasn't a wealthy widow with plenty of resources; that would have made sense. No, she was starving with nothing to offer him. Why did God send Elijah to her? She had undoubtedly prayed to her god Baal to rescue her from starvation, Baal was believed to be the god of the rain. but no rescue came and she prepared to die. **But...** her prayers to Baal were heard by the great God of Israel and, little did she know, that the God of Israel was about to answer her prayer through hungry, thirsty Elijah. He didn't look like he could be much help though; he was as needy as she was.

Here was her moment that required trust with no guarantees. If she took some of her last grain and oil to make Elijah some bread, and Elijah's God didn't come through for her, she and her son would have a smaller last meal and would die faster. Should she enjoy a bigger last meal-something she could count on- or risk a smaller last meal and trust Elijah's God? The bigger last meal was a sure thing; the promise of food from Elijah's God- who knows? Trust a God to whom she had not prayed? Was He even powerful enough to do this for her?

Author Phillip Yancey defined faith as “believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.”¹ Believing in advance means trusting God is powerful enough to do what we need even when we can’t see how. No guarantees. We teach our children that God can do anything! I remember teaching our kids a song, “*My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do.*” But when push comes to shove in the reality of life, as adults, do we honestly believe God is powerful enough for our impossible situations? That God’s power has no boundaries? In the time of today’s story, the various gods of the different nations were assumed to only have power within the boundaries of those nations. Each nation had its own gods and if you moved to another area, you took on the worship of that area’s gods. The widow of Zarephath had to choose whether to believe that the God of Israel, our God, had no such boundaries. And when she believed in advance, and risked sharing her meager food, she found God faithful, and what she hadn’t understood before then made sense.

We face moments requiring faith like this today. Moments when we have to choose between the sure thing we know but which cannot meet our needs or doing something that risks losing what we have, to get what we really need. Perhaps it is a career change that would require learning a whole new field. Or maybe it’s a choice later in life about whether to stay in our familiar home or move to a place better suited for our needs as we age. Perhaps we face the need to find meaning and joy again without the husband or wife we’ve loved for decades. Or an impossible situation with our kids or our spouse and we know we need to deal with the issue, but we’re afraid we could lose our family if we do. This congregation just voted to not renew your lease, to let go of your church space with no new space yet found. You too face whether you will trust God in advance to show you the way you cannot see yet.

Believing in advance is never easy; in fact it’s risky. But remember the last part of Yancey’s definition of faith? “Faith is believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.” Don’t we all have stories of times when we took the risk to believe in advance and acted on that belief not knowing what God would do and then afterwards we understood what God had been doing all along? We can see it better in reverse. It’s why sharing with one another when we’ve seen God at work in our lives is so important. We need to hear each others’ stories and remember together; it strengthens the faith of all of us. It’s comforting to be in the hands of a God whose power has no boundaries. We need Bible stories like this one to remind us, because, like the widow of Zarephath, we will face impossible situations and decisions.

Jesus saw more in this story than just our being comforted by a God whose power has no boundaries. In Luke 4, the people of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, got so angry at Jesus they tried to throw him off a cliff because he dared to retell this story of Elijah and the widow as evidence that God’s **love** had no boundaries. To dare them to imagine that God loved and provided for people besides them- like Gentiles. He reminded them that during the drought in Elijah’s day, surely there were many Jewish widows in Israel who were starving. Yet Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath to bring the news that God was answering her prayer and

¹ Phillip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud.*

providing for her. Does our God take care of people who don't believe in Him? Does our God answer the prayer that is prayed in faith to other gods?

It's tempting to limit God's love to the people we love and agree with. And to limit our own love to people like ourselves. But if we look at Jesus' ministry, he spent much of his time with people others didn't think deserved his attention - prostitutes, tax collectors, the ill and disabled, women and children, the poor, Gentiles, society's outcasts. His love had no such boundaries- he even loved his enemies and those who killed him. And Jesus didn't just sit by, feeling bad for the outcasts, even believing they deserved better; Jesus acted. He healed them, fed them, taught them, invited them to join him. What about us? Does our love go beyond believing, "Black Lives Matter," to acting and voting on their behalf? What about the immigrants on our border? Is our love like God's- big enough to transcend borders - to stand up for them, and fight for the children who've been taken away from their parents, fight until the families are re-united? What about LGBTQ folks? The poor? There are plenty of people who need to experience God's love through us. It's risky to follow Jesus though. Just like in Jesus' day, some righteous people may try to throw us off a theological cliff because we follow in Jesus' footsteps. Will we let our love cross boundaries like Jesus did?

The widow in Zarephath risked sharing her last meal with Elijah and found the Lord made sure she had more than enough. And let us not miss that Elijah also had to believe in advance in order to go looking for a Gentile widow he had never met. And only in reverse did they both understand that God, whose power and love have no boundaries, was meeting both their needs in ways they could not foresee. God will do the same for us. Who is God calling us to love with our words and actions so they can know the God whose love and power has no boundaries? Will we risk loving like Jesus today? As individuals? As Christ's church?

BENEDICTION (Blessing by James Dillet Freeman)

The Light of God surrounds us; The Love of God enfolds us;

The Power of God protects us; The Presence of God watches over us.

Wherever we are, God is there!