

The Washed Up Widow

⁸ The Lord's word came to Elijah: ⁹ Get up and go to Zarephath near Sidon and stay there. I have ordered a widow there to take care of you. ¹⁰ Elijah left and went to Zarephath. As he came to the town gate, he saw a widow collecting sticks. He called out to her, "Please get a little water for me in this cup so I can drink." ¹¹ She went to get some water. He then said to her, "Please get me a piece of bread."

¹² "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any food; only a handful of flour in a jar and a bit of oil in a bottle. Look at me. I'm collecting two sticks so that I can make some food for myself and my son. We'll eat the last of the food and then die."

¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid! Go and do what you said. Only make a little loaf of bread for me first. Then bring it to me. You can make something for yourself and your son after that. ¹⁴ This is what Israel's God, the Lord, says: The jar of flour won't decrease and the bottle of oil won't run out until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth." ¹⁵ The widow went and did what Elijah said. So the widow, Elijah, and the widow's household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of flour didn't decrease nor did the bottle of oil run out, just as the Lord spoke through Elijah.

1 Kings 17:8-16

After the reign of King David, in the years when the 12 tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah to the South, King Ahab acquired the throne of Israel. King Ahab, frankly, didn't know what he was doing. Queen Jezebel ran the show. She was the daughter of the king of Sidon and she had enough experience and ambition for the both of them. This is how Jezebel was able to introduce Israel to the worship of her god, Baal. Had Ahab had even a thimble's worth of King David's character, Israel would have continued to worship YHWH alone. As it was, Jezebel controlled the thimble and everything else in the marriage. Israel worshipped Baal (as directed by Jezebel, the queen named after her god). YHWH noticed.

Jealous for God's people, YHWH sent Elijah (that is, El-i-jahu, "My God is YHWH") to confront Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Ba'al was a storm god, the god who brought rain upon the earth. As someone recently told me, God spends most of God's time laughing, so it should be no surprise that YHWH poked fun of the rain god by turned off the tap. Elijah said to Jezebel, "As surely as the Lord lives, Israel's God, the one I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain these years unless I say so." To upstage the god of rain, YHWH brought drought and famine upon the land.

If you're not convinced of God's ironic sense of humor, listen to where Elijah was called next. God called him to the city of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Sidon, the home town of Jezebel, the region of Ba'al. As Elijah trekked through the barren hill country down toward the coast, foreign dust caught in his throat. The sun in the foreign sky baked his lips. A strange, salty wind chapped his cheeks. The prophet of YHWH stumbled into town like a hobo, a wandering Hebrew with no particular place to go. He collapsed against the city gate.

Elijah awoke when he heard something like the clatter and crack of sticks. There on the quivering-hot horizon was the hunched figure of feeble woman. He let out a hoarse cry, "Please, get a little water for me in this cup so I can drink." Elijah's voice was barely audible, and yet the woman stopped. Maybe she had heard the faint, scratchy request of the parched man. Or perhaps she was responding to a different kind of voice, a voice that calls from within like a still small whisper. She approached the prophet who extended his hand as if he actually held a cup. For this she pitied him, a delirious foreigner on the verge of death. It was not so much pity really as it was sympathy. She too was a social outcast, a widow and a mother, worked and worn as frail as the twigs she carried. She too was on the verge of death. Would it be too much to get the man a final drink?

Returning from the well with a pail of water, the widow knelt beside Elijah. Before she even got the pail to his lips, he asked "Please get me a piece of bread." Well she nearly dropped the bucket. "I

swear to your god, you must be the most ungrateful man ever! Look at me!” Her cheeks were sunken, her complexion sallow; her skin hung from her bones. “I am going to bake what little flour and oil we have. Then my son and I will eat it and die.” What did Elijah hear that made him think, ah yes, *this* is the widow God has commanded to take care of me? She had a son who was either so young as to be unmarried or so sick, crippled, or lame as to be unmarriageable. She was poor, heavy burdened, and in despair, not mention, a foreigner from the land of Baal. How far would God go, how many boundaries would YHWH cross to bring a blessing to this no name woman?

They crossed the threshold of her kitchen door together. Elijah reclined at her table and said, “Don’t be afraid! Do what you said. Only make a little loaf of bread for me first. Then bring it to me. You can make something for yourself and your son after that. Israel’s God, the Lord, says: The jar of flour won’t decrease and the bottle of oil won’t run out until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.” The woman stoked her small fire and muttered silent curses upon this “me first” man who reclined at her table. She whipped a batter, wondering if her kindness would actually kill her.

She slapped a cake onto the round oven and eyed the scraggly stranger sitting by her son. She flipped the cake, folded it, and handed it to Elijah. The widow turned back to the oven, certain that the jar of flour would be no fuller than her stomach. But to her astonishment, there sat her jar packed with meal and her oil pitcher running over.

Do you know what it’s like to be surprised, I mean utterly surprised, by something for which long ago you had given up hope? It’s like inviting someone into your home and trying to start a friendship but it never quite worked out; there were hurt feelings and broken windows. You go your separate ways and then five years later, a decade, you get a phone call and you’re on a plane across the Atlantic going to give friendship another try...that’s a surprise.

It’s like sitting with your husband whose been hospitalized for weeks. Every day brings more needles, more scans, more specialists, but no answers; hope gives way to exhaustion, and thoughts of home fold behind hospital walls. And then one day, the doctor arrives with news. It may be the best news ever or the absolute worst, but all of a sudden there is peace in the room. Uncertainty gives way to hope. Fear is overwhelmed by love. The day you had forgotten has arrived; your husband is coming home...that’s a surprise.

It’s like trying for years to have a baby, accumulating false positives and grieving a miscarriage, and then all of a sudden you’re ears are filled with garbled cries and you’re staring at a blue-eyed baby girl thanking God that she got her mother’s features...that’s a surprise.

You’re half-starved and poor, pretty sure your next meal will be your last; then, in the name of a god you’ve never heard of, there’s a jar of flour that won’t run out and a pitcher of oil that won’t go dry...that’s a surprise.

The widow made small cakes the whole first week. She had known scarcity for so long that this new found abundance was hard to embrace. It took some time, but slowly she learned to trust the prophet’s promise. It helped that she learned to trust the prophet too. You’ll recall that the oil and flour did not run out, but fuel for the oven was not supplied. Each morning after breakfast, Elijah and the widow ventured out beyond the gate together to collect sticks for the day. They would tell stories as they searched and would share laughter by the well. By the afternoon, before the sun was hottest they would return home with more than enough wood for the night. It was not miraculous abundance like the flour, just the everyday miracle of friendship. It sustained them for many days, and it did not run out.

The day came when the prophet of YHWH was called back from the land of Baal. The widow watched from her door way as Elijah passed through the gate and journeyed back over the horizon. The next morning she arose and made big, round cakes for breakfast. She served her son and returned to make a cake for herself. But when she reached for the meal, for the first time in months, she saw the smooth, flour dusted sides of the jar. The jar was not full... She spun toward the door and hurried past her startled son who was eating his breakfast. Looking to the sky, the widow saw a small cloud rising above the ocean. It billowed and grew and filled the horizon. The woman stretched out her hands, which

were not as sore and tired as they used to be. A drop of rain splashed her palm. She raised her arms, which were stronger and more youthful than they used to be. Rain drops drizzled on her skin. She lifted her face to the sky, and rain fell on her warm round cheeks. The water streamed over her lips as she smiled. The day had come. She was full.