

Wild Thing!

Meditation on 1 Kings 17:8-24

June 5, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

“Then the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel, saying, ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’ So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ But she said, ‘As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’ Elijah said to her, ‘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 afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.’ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, ‘What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!’ But he said to her, ‘Give me your son.’ He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?’ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.’ The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the

child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.'

Jim and I, and Marilyn and Craig Smoot traveled together to Maitland to a presbytery meeting this week. It was great to see some of my colleagues in ministry and build on relationships, some of which began 8-9 months ago. One gentleman, a member of the presbytery's committee on ministry, asked me, "How are things at Merritt Island? How are you? Are you happy?"

I told him that I feel at home here. This is where I belong. Things are "good." But I am still learning and growing.

What I didn't tell him was that the one important thing I am learning is the importance of spending time with members outside the church. I am learning how important it is to visit people in their homes. Ministry happens best when we are willing and able to walk alongside another--to meet people right where they live-- and be willing to be vulnerable so that the Spirit can do its healing, transforming work. This intimate kind of ministry is the ministry of *presence*--for it is Christ that dwells within us that does the ministering through us.

I haven't had time to get to know all of you, yet, and visit you in your homes. So this week, I decided to make some changes in my schedule to open up time when these visits can be made. Saying "yes" to home visits means saying "no" to some other things, so I will need your support and understanding to do this. My goal is to visit everyone by the end of this

year--so that Christ in me can work *through* me.

My home visits have already begun!

In our 1 Kings 17 reading, we meet “Elijah the Tishbite.” Tishbe was a remote village in the mountains of Gilead, an area east of the Jordan River. Elijah, whose name means “Yahweh is my God!” is a rough around the edges kind of guy. We know nothing of his childhood, only that he was born to Jewish parents, but we don’t know their names. He appears abruptly in 1 Kings after 16 chapters tell of the succession of Israel’s kings after David dies and the evil that they do. In chapter 16, King Ahab marries Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians. Sidon was a prosperous, commercial city, famous for gold and silver and manufacture of embroidery, dyes, metals, and glass. Although Sidon was within the limits of the Promised Land, the Israelites never possessed it. It belonged to the tribe of Asher, who were unwilling to drive out their wealthy neighbors. Here is modern Sidon today. After marrying Jezebel, Ahab erects “an altar to Baal in the house of Baal” in Samaria, a city that Ahab’s father, Omri, built on a hill bought from a man named Shemer. And Ahab and Jezebel worshiped Baal there.

At the start of chapter 17, Elijah angers King Ahab, who was even more evil than Omri, who was more evil than all Israel’s kings before *him*. Elijah tells the king that Israel is going to suffer from a terrible drought (because of his sins). Elijah promises no “dew or rain” for years, until he, the God of Israel’s prophet, gives the word for the drought to

end. Elijah then flees from Ahab's wrath and goes into hiding by the Wadi Cherith, a stream east of the Jordan, where God commands the ravens to feed him bread and meat. Here, Elijah, fits in with the wild creatures and becomes even more a kind of a wild thing himself, preferring the company of animals to people.

But then the Wadi dries up; Elijah has no water! The Lord tells Elijah, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, for I have commanded a widow to feed you." Zarephath was a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast, between Sidon and Tyre. Here is the modern city, formerly Zarephath.

Elijah is perhaps second only to Moses, when it comes to the most important prophets of the Old Testament. At the transfiguration on the mountaintop, who do the disciples see with Jesus? Moses and Elijah. (Matthew 17:3, "Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.") The story of Elijah and the widow is important to Jesus, who refers to it in Luke 4:25-26, "But I tell you truthfully that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and great famine swept over all the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon."

It is significant that John the Baptist is mistaken for Elijah! John reminded Israel of him! John 1:20-21 tells us, "He (John) did not refuse to confess, but openly declared, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Who are you then?' they inquired. 'Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.'" John is also rough around the edges, a kind of wild thing, living in the wilderness on an unusual diet (honey and locusts), wearing unusual clothing (camel's

hair).

Then, in Matthew 16: 13-14, Jesus is mistaken for Elijah! “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He questioned His disciples: ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’”

Like Jesus, Elijah obeys the Lord. God sends him to live in Zarephath, amongst idol-worshippers, because the Lord has a plan for him to minister to people in need. But this will require Elijah to allow himself to be vulnerable to a stranger. He accepts help from a widow who has given up all hope of surviving the terrible famine; she hasn’t enough food for her and her son. But something stirs her to listen to this kind of wild thing, the prophet of a God she doesn’t know. He tells her in 17:13-14, “Do not be afraid.” She should make him a “cake” with the meal before she feeds her son and herself. “For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” And she does as Elijah says. And the jar of meal doesn’t run out; the oil doesn’t fail. God provides for many days.

But then a crisis of faith. The boy falls ill, and there is “no breath left in him.” He dies! Now you have to understand how desolate the widow feels. Her only child, a son, is her only hope of survival in her society. She is relying on him to take care of her when he is grown. All hope is lost with his death! She turns on Elijah in anger and blames the One whom Elijah credits for miraculously providing for them. “What have you against me, O man of God?!” she asks--and some interpret this as

sarcasm. But she takes partial responsibility for her loss, for it is her own sin that God remembers, she says, when the Lord takes her son.

Elijah, too, believes that God has caused the son's death, but that death doesn't have the final word. All of his emotion pours out in his prayer to the Lord, for this wild prophet of God, a creature that is more comfortable in the wilderness with animals than living with people, has grown to care for this foreign widow and her son, who have shared from their poverty with him. He cries out, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." God hears his prayer. God answers. The child is revived. Hope and joy replace the widow's sarcasm and desolation. "Now I know that you are a man of God," she says, "and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Friends, Elijah's ministry was one of presence. He was willing to walk alongside someone in need--right where they live. The Spirit of God ministered in and through him! His faith grew through God's miraculous provision. It grew even more when God brought the child back to life!

And the stranger, the alien, came to trust Elijah, though he was rough on the outside--a wild thing. Through the witness of his faith, she found her own. She came to trust Elijah's God.

Will you join me in a ministry of presence? May Christ within us work in and through us!

My home visits have already begun!

Let us pray.

Holy One, we give you thanks and praise for your miraculous provision for us day by day, hour by hour. Thank you for sending your Son to make a way for us to return to you when we were lost in our sin. Thank you that Christ lives within the heart of every believer now--and is transforming us into his likeness as we seek to walk in your ways. Help us, Lord, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable--to visit one another right where we live in the intimate ministry of presence. Stir us to open our homes and hearts so that you might work in and through us. May we be like Elijah and seek to care for and be cared for by strangers like the widow from Zarephath and her son--and meet them in their time of need. In Christ we pray. Amen.