

September 3, 2017
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Hungry”

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1 Kings 17:8–16

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So 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.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But 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.” ¹³Elijah 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. ¹⁴For 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.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The 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.

Matthew 14:22–33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

“Hungry”
1 Kings 17:8–16; Matthew 14:22–33

What’s your story? More specifically, what do you know about your **family’s** story? Do you know where your grandparents grew up and how they made a living? Do you know how your parents met? Do you know of a tragedy that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth? If you know the answers to some or all of these questions, then *you would score well* on the aptly named “Do You Know?” scale.

This scale was developed by two psychologists who used it to assess the **emotional health** of children. The psychologists discovered that **the more children knew** about their family’s history, the more they felt in *control* of their lives, the higher their *self-esteem*, and the more they felt *their families functioned well*. It turns out that the “Do You Know?” scale is a great predictor, not just of *happiness* and *well-being*, but also of **resilience**, how easily children recover from setbacks big and small.

Psychologists also found that when parents teach children their family’s stories, they usually choose either an ascending or a descending narrative. An ascending narrative is a story like this: we used to have *nothing*, but because of your grandparents’ hard work at the family business, *we became successful*. A descending narrative is of a family who used to have it all, but then – because of illness or a stock market crash or a natural disaster – lost **everything**.¹

The stories we heard today place us smack in the middle of what appear to be steeply **descending** narratives – a widow struggling to survive a *famine* and the disciples caught in a *storm*. In 1 Kings, just before the passage we heard today, Ahab has become king of Israel, and he is not a good king. He married the evil Jezebel, who encouraged Ahab to worship the Canaanite storm god Baal. The Bible tells us that “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord...than all the kings of Israel who were before him.” Things were definitely **on the decline** for God’s people. And so the Lord appoints the prophet Elijah to announce God’s punishment against Ahab: an extended drought – a death sentence for a people dependent on agriculture.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all&r=4&>

God sends Elijah to Zarephath, the very heartland of the cult of Baal, and the home country of Jezebel. And there, God says, Elijah will be fed by a local widow. Like the Israelites, the widow is in the midst of her own descending narrative – her husband is dead, she has a small child to support, and now, there is a terrible drought. It was never a good time to be a widow in the ancient world, but during a drought, already scarce resources became practically nonexistent. The widow has already figured out where her story is going to end: *she and her son are going to die*.

The disciples are convinced that they are going to die too. After witnessing the miracle of the feeding of thousands of people with just a few loaves and fishes, Jesus sends them off in a boat while he goes to pray. This boat ends up way farther from shore than any of them wanted to be, with a strong wind working against all of their efforts to get back to land. Death is staring them in the face, and *they are afraid*.

Writing about the death of his mother after a long illness, Tom Long recalls how every day in hospice care, she would beckon one of the loved ones who kept vigil at her bedside and whisper the words, “I’m hungry.” She had a feeding tube and she was getting as much broth and pureed foods as her dying body could handle, but still she kept telling them, day after day: “I’m hungry.” The hospice staff assured the family that her body could not feel hunger pains, but it still upset them. One day, Tom entered the room and found her restless in her bed. “What’s wrong,” he asked. “Are you hungry?” “Very,” she whispered. Tom felt helpless. He didn’t know what to do. He tried to give her some soft food, but after a couple of bites, she shook her head. No more. “Slowly it dawned on me,” he writes. “‘I’m hungry’ was her way of describing the totality of her circumstance. She was not asking for food; she was saying that everything was slipping away, her personal history was closing down, coming to an end. Her days of breath and food and light and family and the touch of love were ebbing, and she was hungry, hungry for more, hungry for the life being taken away from her...*very* hungry.”²

The widow of Zarephath was hungry — so hungry that she has accepted imminent death by starvation. But she is also hungry the way Tom Long’s mother was hungry at the end of her life — hungry for a better life for herself and her son, hungry for community and support, hungry for respect and

² Thomas G. Long, “Easter -- The Extra Scenes?” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Easter 2010, p. 36.

dignity. All alone on that boat, battered by the winds and the waves, the disciples are hungry too – perhaps literally, since they’ve been out on the water a long time – but certainly spiritually, which is why they are hanging out with Jesus in the first place. They are hungry for a better life for themselves and their families, hungry for community and support, hungry for respect and dignity.

And of all the disciples, Peter is always the hungriest – he always wants to know the answer, he is always eager for Jesus’s attention. If Jesus is walking on water, Peter wants to do the same. So Peter is hungry to get out of that boat and get in on this latest miracle – until a strong wind blows and he realizes what’s happening and his fear gets the better of him.

After the widow tells Elijah her sad story of how she’s getting ready to make a final, meager meal for herself and her son and then die, this strange prophet from another land says to her, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus says that same thing to the panicked disciples who think he is a ghost walking toward them on the churning waters of the sea. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

I don’t know about you, but those are words I am **hungry** to hear right now. *Be not afraid*. Storms and droughts – literal and metaphorical – are raging all around us. We are battered by winds that keep us from getting where we want to go. We are starved by a lack of civility and stability and predictability. The ground feels like it is shifting beneath our feet. But notice: in these two biblical stories in which people face terrifying circumstances, God’s message is the same: *be not afraid*.

The writer Anne Lamott once took a vacation to Lake Tahoe with her two year-old son, Sam. This area near Reno is a hotbed of gambling, which means that all the rooms in hotels or condos have curtains so heavy and thick that the rooms can be dark as night even in the middle of the day. One afternoon, Anne put Sam down for a nap in his crib, closed the curtains, and went into the other room to work, pulling the door shut behind her. A few minutes later, she heard Sam calling to her. Sam had climbed out of his crib and gotten to the door. But when he had grasped the doorknob, he had depressed the button lock. Try as she might, Anne could not get him to unlock the door. When it became clear that his mother couldn’t open the door, Sam cried and screamed while Anne, in a panic, called the rental agency for the condo and left message after message.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, she lay down next to the door, reached her fingers in the small space underneath it and told Sam to reach down and find her fingers in the dark. He did. And as the reality of his mother's love and presence sunk in, Sam gradually calmed down. Mother and son stayed like that for a long time, lying on the floor side by side, a locked door between them, taking comfort in the touch of their fingers.³

In addition to ascending and descending narratives there is a third narrative that some families tell. It is called an oscillating narrative, a story that involves ups and downs, good times and bad. There was the successful family business, but then grandpa was injured in the war and could no longer work, and the business failed. Your mother graduated from college and got a good job, but then she got laid off. But no matter what, we stuck together as a family. Psychologists have discovered that this kind of oscillating narrative gives children self-confidence, because they learn that they can expect both good times and bad times and they can weather difficult circumstances. It turns out that telling *all of our stories*, not just the ones that make us look good, but the ones that show how we cope with the bad – is what builds our capacity for resilience.

But notice: those kids who scored well on the “Do You Know” scale only did so because someone in their family took the time to tell them not just their family's successes, but its failures as well. Which means that if we don't take the time and muster the courage to have difficult conversations about our histories – the histories of our families, our churches, and our country – then we won't reap the benefits that come from a deeply rooted and clear-eyes awareness of our successes and our failures.

One of the great things about being part of something bigger than ourselves – whether a family, a school, a church, or a country – is that we learn about the oscillating narrative of that community. Because, if we are honest, *every* community has an oscillating narrative. And when we join together with people in a community, it is by telling these stories to each other, teaching them to our children, and talking amongst ourselves about what they mean, that we build our capacity for *resilience* and *trust*. Telling our stories helps us to be **honest** about our past – yes, there have been bad times, when things looked really dark and we were hungry in all kinds of ways and battered by all kinds

³ From the sermon, “Belonging”, by Mark Ramsey, in *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 23.

of storms. But telling our stories also teaches us the ways that *God shows up* in the midst of all kinds of stories, because in Bible stories, in church history, and in the histories of our families, we often experience God with us and providing for us just when we think our story is coming to a terrible end.

According to the oscillating narrative of our Christian faith, this is what God does. **God shows up**. God **provides**. God finds the crack beneath the door and does *whatever it takes* to be **with** us. *God loves*. What God provides may not be much more than a scant handful of meal and few drops of oil, or the reach of a hand to steady us when we start sinking, or the barest touch of fingers underneath a locked door, but *by God's grace it is enough*.

Today, we gather around this table. This table where we tell our most *sacred stories*. This table where we practice *welcoming everyone*. This table where we *acknowledge our mistakes*. This table where we receive God's gift of *endless second chances*. And the only requirement for receiving this meal is that we come *hungry*, hungry for love, for justice, for peace, for forgiveness, *hungry for God*. It took great courage for that widow to share her meager provisions with a stranger. It took great courage for Peter to step out of the boat and walk toward Jesus. Great courage, which in both cases was ignited by *hunger*, hunger both physical and spiritual.

Are you hungry? Hungry for a better life, hungry for community and support, hungry for dignity and respect, hungry for love and mercy? Then come to this table, and may this meager meal and the God who provides it give you **courage** beyond your experience and beyond your imagination, so that, wherever your story has brought you today, you can know God's presence and provision, and with confidence and faith, claim your part in God's story.

Amen.