

Nov. 1, 2020 -- (Pentecost 23, God's Care for the Widow)

Sermon Text – 1 Kings 17:1-16 [17-24]

- The word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." ...Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ...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." ...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...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." -

I think it was just a little over a year ago that our good, Minnesota company, Hormel, announced that it was going to offer a once in a lifetime, possibly never-to-be repeated, opportunity to purchase pumpkin spice flavored Spam. It was to be available for online orders only. It would not be available in stores. And quantities would be limited. Now, I am a fan of pumpkin spice flavor; Brenda, not so much. On the day that pumpkin spice Spam became available, I tried many times to get through to Hormel's website to place my order, but I had no luck. The servers were overwhelmed by the high demand. I had to go to work, so Brenda, who had some spare time that day, kept trying. Eventually, she was successful. She ordered me the two cans I was allowed to order. To thank her, I ordered her an entire case of assorted flavors of Spam, which did not include pumpkin spice. We had seen them on our anniversary trip to Hawaii, where Spam is considered to be the equivalent of Hawaiian soul food. Needless to say, we have never had that many cans of Spam in our pantry, either before or since. And, in a bit of foreshadowing for our story about Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath, our supply of Spam has never run out since. We are still eating on that one, single, ordering of that delicious, canned meat. It just never seems to run out.

Before I go on, I want to acknowledge one important truth. We live in a highly polarized and polarizing world. Just as there are people who like pumpkin spice and people who don't, there are also people who think Spam is delicious and those who wouldn't taste it, even if you paid them. We have people on both sides of those issues in our own family. So, I want to say this – whichever group you are in, pumpkin spice lover or not, or Spam eater or not – God loves you and so do I. These are not

issues of ultimate importance, nor are they even issues of great or serious importance. They are trivial issues, of no great importance at all, except to the makers of the spices usually used in pumpkin pie or to the Hormel company, which wants to sell as much Spam as possible. The fact of the matter is that most people don't think very much about Spam, nor do they have a particularly high opinion of it either. For many, it is thought of as the lowest form of meat product you can buy. It's the protein of last resort. If you had nothing else to eat, maybe you would consider a slice of Spam, maybe not. That's why all that junk mail you get on your computer is called "spam." It seems that students in a computer lab at the University of Southern California began to compare the unwanted junk mail they received on their computers with the delicious pork product that comes in a can because 1) nobody wants it or ever asks for it, 2) no one ever actually eats it or reads it, as the case may be, and 3) sometimes it's actually quite tasty, like the one percent of spam emails that are actually useful to a small handful of people, who receive them.

The thing about Spam is that it is rightfully an emergency food ration. It gained its reputation as a food that soldiers could carry into battle and eat directly from the can. It has a very long shelf life. And it's stackable, so that you can fit a lot of it into a small space on the back shelves of your cupboard. In our reading for today, Elijah needs such rations. He appears suddenly in 1 Kings 17 as a prophet standing before King Ahab and proclaiming that there will be a drought in the land until he says that it's over. That puts him into a heap of trouble. The king is his enemy. The queen hates his guts. He's now running for his life. God sends him into enemy territory. And, for food, he has to rely first on a flock of unclean birds, and then on the good graces of a foreign widow, who is herself at the end of her rope. To put this into a contemporary perspective, he's like a person in a pandemic who is reliant on the willingness of others to provide for his safety and his ongoing sustenance. It's like he has a pre-existing condition that puts him at special risk for contracting the virus; and, if he does, suffering devastating effects upon his health. In other words, he needs the help of others, or he's not going to make it.

This happens first, when Elijah is directed eastward, out of the country, to a place beside a small stream, where he is fed by ravens. The stream provides him with water, and the birds bring him what the Bible calls bread and meat. Ravens are scavengers. They eat dead things. So, my guess is that the only thing that makes their offerings of food edible, is that they are somehow blessed by God. Otherwise, they are pretty much far worse than the canned meat that Spam-haters despise. In recent years, I have heard a theory, put forward by some Old Testaments scholars, that attempts to soften this by suggesting that the Hebrew word for "raven" is very

similar to the word for “Arab,” which could mean that Elijah was fed, not by birds, but by wandering shepherds, who would have been equally unclean, but whose food would have been much more palatable. When the water in the stream dries up because of the drought, Elijah is instructed to move on. This time, he is told to travel to the north and west, again into foreign territory, to the village of Zarephath, where he will be fed by a poor widow. When he sees her gathering sticks to make a fire, and asks for a drink of water and a morsel of bread, her answer is the Biblical equivalent of “but all I have is this one, last can of Spam.” She has only a handful of meal and a bit of oil, she tells him, enough to make one last small cake to share with her son before they have used up all their resources, and have no hope left, but to give up and wait for death to free them from their poverty. Elijah’s answer is the classical Biblical response, “Do not be afraid...the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until [the drought is over].” And, because of God’s miraculous provision, that is exactly what happens. The three of them have enough to eat every day. The jar is not emptied and the jug does not fail.

Nonetheless, the widow’s son dies. Even amidst a time of God’s miraculous provision, reality intercedes. We don’t know how or why. We only know that his illness was severe enough that he stopped breathing. At this, the widow’s anger is kindled against Elijah. What has he brought to her house, she wonders, that her son should be taken from her. But Elijah is undeterred. He takes the boy, cries out to God, goes through some ritual that, quite frankly, I don’t understand, implores God once again, and life comes back into the boy. The prophet returns him to his mother, and she takes this of proof that Elijah is there from God, declaring, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

So, what can we say about this? The first thing is that God provides. Under the worst of circumstances, when we are down to our last can of Spam, or our final morsel of bread, God provides. Whether it be by means of ravens, or desert nomads, or the poorest of the poor in the community, God provides. And even when tragedy falls upon tragedy, when illness piles in on top of starvation, when even the simplest thing becomes impossible for us to do, God provides. And second, God’s provisions are enough. They may not be overflowing our storage containers. That will be an image brought to us by the Psalmist, “My cup overflows.” But they will be adequate. “The jar of meal will not go empty and the jug of oil will not fail.” There will always be something, even if it is only regular flavored Spam. Think about the Hebrews out in the wilderness subsisting on a daily ration of manna and the occasional quail for forty years. Apparently, that’s enough to get by. Only oil and meal fashioned into a simple pancake isn’t much either, but Elijah, the widow and her son going for a long

time. And finally, the source of God's provisions can come from just about anywhere. Think about those ravens, scavenger birds, willing to share what they could glean from wherever they got it. It may not have been a fine dining experience, but it kept Elijah alive, at least until the water ran out. Or, if it was Arab Bedouins, maybe it was quite a bit better. They would have had their own bread and sheep or goats for meat, but it would still come from an "unclean," and by that I mean "outside" source. They were not members of the designated people of God. And yet, God would have used them to keep the prophet alive. Or take the Widow of Zarephath. She is clearly a foreigner. She is probably a worshiper of Baal, the most problematic of the foreign deities at this time. Elijah is about to have a mountaintop showdown with Baal's priests. Still, one of Baal's most humble adherents is designated by God to feed the prophet in his time of need.

This is All Saints Day. It is the day in the church when we celebrate all of God's saints from the least of them to the greatest. I am glad that we have begun to stretch the meaning of "saint" to include much more than the few, shining examples of the Christian faith, or the limited number of our brothers and sisters who have faithfully gone on to their heavenly rewards. By adding the newly baptized and the newly received into our community, we have broadened the definition of "saint" to include us, who are the living saints of God. But our story for today, about the unclean and the outsiders who are called upon to serve God by providing for the needs of God's prophet, suggests that our definition may still be too small. Maybe God has saints who are not even numbered within the membership of our community or even in the broader Christian church. Maybe they come to us from other faith communities or from no faith communities at all. This is a theme that will come back to us again, in a story told by Jesus himself, when we hear the parable of the "Good Samaritan" from Luke's gospel. And he points to it in our gospel reading for today, saying that Elijah could have been sent to any number of widows in Israel and the Elisha could have healed many lepers, other than Naaman the Syrian. It seems that God may be far more inclusive than we might imagine, at least if God is even willing to use anyone who is willing to share with us their last can of Spam.

Amen.