



**June 13, 2010 Sermon by Kimiko Karpoff**  
***Hungering for Rain***

Readings: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Today's scripture invited us in to a moment in the life of a destitute woman raising a child during a time of famine in her land. She is nameless in the story, described as a widow, both of which are indications of her insignificance and poverty.

In that time and place, 3000 years ago in the near far east, a widow who had not been redeemed, or taken into the care of a male relative, would have been both marginalized and impoverished. In years of plentiful harvest, she would have fed herself and her son through gleaning, picking bits of crops that were left behind in the fields and orchards, grain that had fallen on the ground or olives that had been left unpicked.

But the land was in the midst of famine so there was nothing to glean. And now all she has left is a small bit of meal and a dribble of oil. She is at the end of her meager reserves.

There are times when I feel like that widow. Not literally starving for food, but at the end of my reserves. I feel insignificant and like there is nothing left to feed me, to give me energy beyond the next thing I need to do. And like the appearance of Elijah, sometimes it's something unexpected that keeps my reserves going until the rains come.

Elijah is often considered to be one of the greatest of the Biblical prophets. The name Elijah means "Yahweh is my God." He's a striking character a bit like John the Baptizer, with long hair, bushy beard, rough clothing. He's a bit of an enigma, an unknown. We know almost nothing about him. Unlike with many other prophets we don't ever learn his family lineage. He is called Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead. In some renderings Tishbite itself means stranger so even in his name he is Elijah the stranger from among the strangers in Gilead. And yet he is a prophet of the one God, Yahweh, during the reign of King Ahab.

Backing up a bit, we see that events had not gone as planned for the Israelites. The people of Yahweh had longed for a king, in the way that other nations had kings. A human king. Reluctantly, but with great love, Yahweh had anointed a king for Yahweh's people. But now, many years and rulers later, the people had split. The kingdom was divided with Judea in the north and Israel in the south. King Ahab ruled the southern kingdom of Israel.

And Ahab had stopped following Yahweh. He took a foreign wife and served the god Baal. We hear in first Kings 16 that "He did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him," (1 Kings 16:30) and that Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1 Kings 16:33b) Considering the track record of some of the former kings, this was bad.

Yahweh responded by holding back the rain.

And so, it is in the midst of a great famine when we pick up our story with Elijah. There had been neither dew nor rain for years. At God's direction, Elijah had been hanging out in a fertile valley east of the Jordan. It had water, and the ravens of the valley brought him bread and meat in the morning and the evening. But now with the lack of rain, even the water in the valley had dried up.

At this point, rather oddly it would seem, God directs Elijah to go to a small, Phoenician town called Zarephath where he would be fed by a widow. In the middle of a famine, God directs Elijah, the stranger, to go to a small, foreign town to get food from an impoverished widow. The hungry stranger is to ask help of the destitute. Hmm.

So Elijah goes, and he finds the widow gathering sticks, fire wood to cook the last meal for her and her son before their food runs out and they starve to death. When he asks her for a morsel of bread to eat, she says something interesting. She says, "As the Lord your God lives I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal and a little oil."

"As the Lord, **your** God lives," she said. Not my God or our God, but **your** God. The widow is from one of the peoples who follow the god Baal. And yet she both knows of Yahweh and pegs Elijah as a follower. She knows that not only is Elijah a stranger to her, but is even more a stranger, a follower of a different god. And yet she seems to trust this God.

The widow then explains her plan to take that small bit of meal and oil, create a cake of bread for herself and her son, after which they would have no more and they would die, they would starve to death. She is at the end of her reserves.

Elijah says, "Do not be afraid." And then he asks her to make him a little cake as well. "For thus says Yahweh, The God of Israel; the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that Yahweh sends rain on the earth." And the widow does, she shares her last bit of food with this stranger.

There is so much about this story that speaks to me. Listening to it, I can feel the weight and the weariness of this woman's life.

This story speaks to me of empty cups, those times in our lives where we having nothing left to sustain us. Those are the days when I get up in the morning devoid of energy, physical or spiritual. My arms feel heavy and my temper is short.

Often I can track how I got to that place in a story that parallels this one. I will have started following a king that had turned away from God. That king is usually busy-ness. There's work, there's school, there are family obligations. I stop taking time to pause, to notice the first flowers of spring, to connect with friends, to express my gratitude, to delight in the day. In other words I ignore Yahweh in favour of the god of busy-ness. No time. And no wonder that I feel destitute.

When it seems like there is no time, this is when it's most important to be intentional about these things. But I'm not. And soon enough I'm in a famine. At this point even a moment of pause doesn't sustain me. Of course the pause is usually one of exhaustion if I'm honest. And at some point I realize that once that next meal is cooked, I'm done, I've got nothing left.

I suspect I'm not alone in this. Most of us have times when we feel like we've come to the end of our reserves.

Often it is the stranger that helps me to continue on, that points to my reserves and says, they'll last until the rain falls. Sometimes that stranger is strange simply because our culture has made them so. Taking time to walk up town to do my errands is a stranger in the kingdom of busy-ness. But when I do I find that I notice the first flowers on the dogwood trees are as richly pink as a little girl's dress. I catch up with neighbours on the street and in their yards. And I can name my gratitude as those small amazing connections delight my day. It gets me through until the rains come, as I feel God come back into my life.

Of course Elijah is also hungry in this story. Although he hasn't followed the false ruler, he is not immune to the impacts this ruler has had on the land. The famine is broad and harsh. He's just watched a fertile valley go dry and walked for many days to get to this town where God has directed him.

He must be wondering what the heck God is up to. "I'm starving here, and you're sending me to go see a widow? Hello?!" But Elijah trusts that sometimes God directs us to places that are foreign to us, and our best bet is to follow this lead.

I've also had this experience. I spent many years working as an outreach minister doing the work of social justice in the church. I believed that I would continue to do that work until I completed my training in diaconal ministry. But there came a point when I started noticing the valley going dry. I realized that God was calling me someplace else. It wasn't a convenient point in my life. It would have been much easier to continue in that work than to have to go looking for something else. You can imagine Elijah in the valley knowing it was going dry but not knowing how bad it was everywhere else. It would have been very tempting to stay there.

Like Elijah, I listened to God and took the risk. I resigned from my regular job and did something that's not very practical for someone in their 40s. I went to work a summer position as a Program Resource at Naramata Centre. I quit the job that supported my family to work at summer camp. I simply trusted that something else would emerge after those ten weeks of work were over.

Sending me to Naramata was akin to God sending Elijah to Zarephath. It was kind of the middle of nowhere for me and foreign. I wasn't a youth minister in particular. And yet I found such sustenance in that place. And the basket continued to be filled. At the end of the summer I was invited to work at Northwood United Church in Surrey as their

interim minister for youth and young families. Many people who had busy ministries of their own mentored me and shared their wisdom and grace as I was learning about ministry with youth and young adults.

I spend one more summer at Naramata and now I am here, a stranger having walked into this place and found that there is yet more grain and oil. All of this has nourished me and I find that I have new life for justice work now. In fact I have been asked to take part in a national conference on justice issues.

There are many facets to this scripture. Sometimes we are the widow at the end of our resources, and sometimes we are Elijah following God's voice even as we're physically hungry. And sometimes we are like the widow who shares her small resources. And sometimes we are like Elijah who walks into the town a stranger but offers hope in the reminder that the famine will end and we'll make it through until then.

This is the story of a hungry stranger from a land of strangers who seeks the help of a destitute person living on the margins and together they experience God's abundance as they hunger for rain.

May it be so for us.

I invite us to take a minute of quiet reflection before responding in song.