

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him:⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.”¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?”¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.”¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’ ”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:7-16)

Don’t Be Afraid

When was the last time you were afraid? I could personally list lots of times, but the very last one happened on Friday. After a week in which I was gone for two days, I came in on Friday expecting to write a sermon, only to discover that a pipe had frozen and burst and flooded my office. Between needing to help with the evacuation of my library, and the fact that it was already Friday, I was afraid that I might not have a sermon to preach to you this morning. One of our members kept saying, “Pastor, this is an off the cuff week.” That really helped calm my fears a lot. So when was the last time you were afraid? You might have faced something much more serious than that. This week, one of the kids in my catechism class had major surgery. I’m sure she and her parents had some fears about that. One of our teachers was in the hospital. Week after week, we pray for people who are fighting cancer. I’m sure I’m not even scratching the surface. In this life, there are so many reasons to be afraid. That’s exactly the problem that God addresses in our Old Testament lesson for today. The prophet Elijah speaks to a widow in a hopeless situation and he says words that God wants every one of us to take to heart: **Don’t be afraid.**

Now, we don’t know this woman’s name. But we do know why she was afraid. She was a widow with a young son. She lived in a time when there was no social security or welfare. There were no pensions or social services to take care of people like her. In that time and place, widows and orphans starved if some family member didn’t step up to help. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Elijah had commanded the skies not to rain as a judgment against Israel’s heathen king. Now, this woman actually lived just outside of Israel. But the drought hit all the surrounding countries, too. In that time and place, a drought meant that crops failed and people starved. We don’t know how far into the drought all this happened, but God tells us that it lasted for three and half years. Long before that time ended, this woman and her son were on the verge of starvation.

Did she have good reason to be afraid? Absolutely. In fact, she was at the point of despair. She was preparing to use the very last of her food supplies to make one last meal for herself and her son. Then she planned to wait to die of starvation with him. But God sent Elijah to this poor, starving widow so because he had chosen her to provide for him until the drought ended. God doesn’t always work through the obvious means. God doesn’t tie himself to the things that we think will be powerful. In fact, he prefers to show his power in weakness. Even when there is no hope, God creates hope. Even when all we can do is fail or lose or die, God gives success and victory and life. That’s what he did here. This woman had a jar with just a handful of flour and a container with just enough oil to make one little loaf of bread. God made that flour and oil last until the drought was over – maybe two or even three years.

Day after day, she went to that little supply of flour and oil and made enough food for all three of them to survive. Why didn’t God just give her enough food to make it through all at once? He could’ve done one quick miracle and given her barrels of flour and gallons of oil and then moved on to something else. If he had

done that, it would've been easy for them to see how they were going to survive. But instead, God bound himself to doing the same miracle, over and over again, perhaps hundreds of times. And every day, that woman had to open those containers and see how little flour and oil she had left and make the bread for that day – and then trust that the miracle would happen again tomorrow.

Why did God do it that way? Because faith is something that we need every single day. Even if God had given her a mountain of flour and swimming pools full of oil, there would always have been other things to fear – in that situation, maybe people rioting and taking the flour and oil by force. God wanted her to trust him. So God dealt with her faith every single day. And God does the same thing for us, because, my friends, faith is the cure to fear.

What is faith? It's trusting God's promises. We know they're true because our Father who loves us makes those promises. We need that trust every single day. Life hurts. Life is hard. Life is scary. Even if you didn't have surgery this week, what did worry you? What kept you up at night? What are you afraid of, day in and day out? Trusting in God's love and his promises is the only cure for that fear.

How do we get that trust? It comes from Jesus. You see, the only reason that we have to be afraid of anything is sin. God created us to live in a perfect world where no one ever got sick, no one ever fought, no one ever died. We weren't even supposed to know what fear was, because there wasn't supposed to be anything out there that could hurt us. But when Adam and Eve sinned, they ruined God's perfect world. Now, we sinners die. We get sick. We fight. We make our own lives harder and we hurt and get hurt by the people we love most. And the world itself is full of dangers and problems that collide with our lives over and over again. All of that is the result of sin. It's all just the foretaste of death and hell which are waiting for all of us.

But God didn't leave us doomed to death and hell. He sent Jesus to be perfect in our place. He did that for every single person who will ever live – he did it for you and me. Then Jesus died and paid for all our sin. He suffered death and hell and everything that we sinners have coming. God the Father raised him from the dead to say that we're paid for and we're free. Hell is not waiting for us anymore. Even death is now the beginning of our time with Christ. Because Jesus has rescued us from sin and death, he has already rescued us from all that we fear here. One day we will live with him. When we die, we will go to heaven and we will rise and live in a new and perfect world.

But God's promises in Christ are not only for the life to come. God promises to take care of us here, just like he took care of Elijah and the widow and her son. But just like he did then, God parcels out his grace to us day by day because sin and fear attack us day by day. God doesn't usually let us win a hundred million dollars in the lottery. He gives us jobs that pay the bills so that we have food and clothes and a warm home in the winter. God may let us face illness and pain and loss. But he gives us the faith to trust in him and endure those hardships. He comes to us when we're afraid, through our pastors and teachers and Christians friends and family, and he points us to Jesus, and that gospel message strengthens our faith. And God hears our prayers and often rescues us, even here.

God even does miracles for us. But God only provided miraculous food for this widow during the drought. When it was over, this woman had to go back to however she supported herself before. Now, if you read the next few verses, you'll see that Elijah did do one more tremendous miracle for her that's not part of this story. But most of her life, she didn't see God's miracles. That's true for us, too. We may live our whole lives without seeing an obvious miracle. Most of the time, God works through ordinary things to take care of us. God does not promise that if we get sick, our pastor will come and heal us. He does not promise that if we lose our job, we'll have a refrigerator where the food never runs out. He did those kinds of miracles in the Bible to show us that he has all power over the universe and it has to obey him and do the impossible if he commands it. So we can trust that he will take care of us, even if that means that he uses jobs and doctors and education and all the normal things that we can see. We are still in his hands. The God who sent Jesus to save us, calls us to trust him today and every day.

So what does that promise mean for us, on a day to day basis? First and foremost, it means comfort and courage. Don't be afraid. God will get us through. But every time I read this account, I'm amazed by the conversation Elijah had with the widow. God sent Elijah out of Israel to a foreigner. During a drought, Elijah asks her for a drink. And when she goes to get it, Elijah calls out after her and asks her to bring him something to eat, too. This poor widow is out collecting firewood to make the last meal she thinks that she and her son will ever eat, and God has Elijah ask her for something to eat. Then when she explains how little she has left

and what she's doing, Elijah says, **"Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first"** did you hear that? **"But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son."** "Yeah, lady, I know you've got nothing left. But give it to me." How could Elijah even ask that? How on earth could she ever do it?

Because of what Elijah said next: **"For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'"** God did not expect this woman to make a leap of faith on her own. He didn't expect her to earn his grace and to do something nice and hope God rewarded her. God made a promise to her. The thing that you must understand about this is that God builds his power into his promises. God's promises work miracles – not always the kind of miracle we can see. God's promises change hearts. That take sinners who hate God and make them believers. God promised to rescue her. God used that promise to give this woman the kind of faith she needed to do what God commanded her.

There are lots of interesting questions this account raises about this woman. But the important thing for us today is the effect that faith has on us believers. Not only does it comfort us in a world that's full of hurt, it changes our priorities. It moves us to live in a new and different way. The world around us is full of people who get ahead by sinning. Sometimes we're afraid that if we don't do what they're doing, we're going to suffer. We're afraid to live as God says. On the flip side, it's hard to be dedicated to the Lord, to come to church week after week, to give a generous portion of the money we earn, to serve on a project here at church or to share our faith with people out there. We're afraid of what all that will cost us. Well guess what? God knows that! He doesn't expect us to dig down deep and find the courage to serve him. He expects to come and hear about all that Jesus has done for us and won for us. He expects to come and listen to his promises. Then he does a real miracle. He reaches inside us and makes us new and different. He builds up our faith and gives us the courage to live for him.

So don't be afraid. Even though my office is empty right now and I don't know where I'm going to write my sermon for next week, somehow God made sure you heard the gospel today. That young lady who had the surgery got to go home, in record time. Our 3rd and 4th grade teacher is still in the hospital, but she's making progress. The kids made get well cards for her last week and it touched her heart and gave her a couple of hours of pure joy. And God has filled her heart with trust so she's not afraid. Now, that doesn't mean that everything we face will go so well. But Jesus died and rose for us. He conquered all that sin does to us. We will win, my friends, in the end. Until the day of victory comes and Jesus returns, he will be with us. He will strengthen our faith. He will carry us through all that we have to face here. All that is his promise. Trust him and don't be afraid. Amen.