

Whenever we think of stories that we have learned from Scripture, usually those that come most readily to mind are from the New Testament, specifically the Gospels as we think of the stories of Jesus. In the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, we make think of the stories from Genesis or Exodus, but often after that folks are quite as familiar with the stories of old.

Today's scripture comes from 1 Kings. A little background up to this point in 1 Kings before we jump in. If you remember back to the time of Judges, the people were looking around at the other nations and decided that they wanted someone to lead them, someone to rule them. When they had a judge, who was usually both a military leader and a person of some wisdom, things went well. But when that judged died, Israel would revert back to the place where everyone did their own thing, and would stray from God.

Eventually the people started to demand a King as a ruler. Now, the truth is that God should have been their King, but they were looking around at the other nations and decided that they wanted a ruler that looked liked everyone else's (even if they were not like everyone else). So God granted them a King. Or rather many kings over the years, that had varying degrees of faithfulness and success.

By the time we get to 1 Kings, Kings were often accompanied by prophets, which was a bit of an uncomfortable situation for the prophets. They were supposed to be giving these prophetic words, which lets be honest, could put them in a position where they were going against the King. So it was with the prophet Elijah, who served during the time of King Ahab. Right before we get in chapter 17, we find Elijah telling Ahab that this massive drought that Israel was experiencing was his fault. Caused by his actions. And then he ran into the wilderness.

What is beautiful about chapter 17 is that in twenty-four short verses, there are three profound miracles. In contrast to Ahab who was unfaithful, God was always faithful. Faithful to the prophet. Faithful to the people.

First, God, even in the wilderness, provides for Elijah's hunger and thirst. God has ravens come and bring bread and meat to the prophet. Elijah is instructed to drink form the wadi, until the wadi dried up and God told Elijah to continue to move on.

Stop and think about that for a moment. God commanded even the birds to come and minister to Elijah's most basic needs. God would not leave Elijah's side, even in the wasteland. Jehovah Jirah - the great provided.

Then Elijah followed the command of God and went to Zarephath. When he arrived he sees this widow gathering sticks, presumably to build some sort of fire. We don't exactly know why, but Elijah calls out to her for hospitality - for a bit of water and bread. Once again to quench his hunger and thirst.

But the woman didn't even have enough supplies to make a little bit of bread. She continues saying that all she has is meal and enough oil to make something small for herself and her son, so they could eat it and then die.

This woman's situation was desperate. If you remember, all throughout the Hebrew Scriptures people are commanded to take care of the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. Why? Because they were the most vulnerable in society. In a society that were wealth and land and provision were passed down from male to male, without a man in their lives to provide, they were truly on their own. Dependent upon the hospitality and compassion of other people. This woman is so, so vulnerable, and in her statement we can see that the others around her have failed to take care of her and her son. Now here she is, just waiting to die.

Elijah, this complete stranger, who just stepped out of the wilderness, however, tells her not to be afraid, but to make a little cake for him as well as her and her son. This woman must be thinking to herself if he even heard her. There isn't even enough for her and her son together, let alone a whole other cake for this man. But Elijah tells her not to be afraid, that she will be provided for.

And she is! In a mighty way. This woman who was hungry for hope and thirsty for provisions experienced the second miracle in this text, as her meal and oil did not run out.

If you want to know about the third miracle in this text, I would encourage you to continue to read on, for it truly shows the might and power of God's hand.

But, if we stick with the text before us, I keep wondering a few things. First, what are we hungering and thirsting, brothers and sisters. What is the deepest longing of your heart where you are just in need of a miracle. For Elijah and this woman, part of their hungering and thirsting was for actual food and drink, in the midst of a drought and lack of care from the community around them. But its also so much more than that. They are hungering to be found in the midst of feeling lost. Hungering to have hope in the midst of what looks like a hopeless situation. Hungering for justice and hospitality when it seems like the world around them has forgotten them. They stand in need and God meets their desires in ways beyond their expectations.

So, what are we in need of today? And are we letting ourselves be ministered to by God, even in the most unexpected of ways?

Second, how might God be calling you to be the answer to someone else's longing. Here is a woman who is the poorest of the poor who had just resigned to give up, but because of her experience with Elijah that day, she was able to carry on. Her dignity was restored. When no one in her family or her community abided by the command to care for the orphan and the widow, this stranger did. And her life was changed because of it.

How are we in solidarity with people like this widow? How is God just waiting to use us to touch the lives of others in ways that restore their dignity and give them a future with hope? Are we attuned enough to the voice of God and the movement of the Spirit, like Elijah, to be obedient?

All of the miracles in chapter 17 show up the character and fingerprints of God. For they are all miracles of compassion. Miracles that show God's tender concern for others. The problem we run into, friends, is when we are not people of compassion. When we think only about our own needs and are just like everyone else who ignored the widow, the orphan and the stranger. When we make sure that we are number one and disregard everyone else, even if that isn't the intention of our hearts.

Who are we going to be when we leave this place? Are we going to be a people of compassion who reach out to those who are hungering and thirsting? Or are we going to be those who ignore others who God has put right before us? Who are we going to be as the people of God? Amen.