

Please first read this week's preaching text from 1 Kings 17:1-24

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whether or not you are old enough to remember this hit song by a band named Blood, Sweat, & Tears from the summer of 1969, I have a feeling that you will be able to complete the phrase that the song opens with which is, "What goes up... (must come down)." The name of the song is *Spinning Wheel*. Now if you have heard me preach a time or two, you might well be wondering, "And whatever random thoughts made you think of that song, this week?" Well, last week, the story was from Second Samuel, chapter seven and told how God promised to King David, "Your house and your kingdom... your throne shall be established forever" (v.16). This news and the events surrounding this time represented a high point for the people of Israel and King David. But it didn't last. Because of course, "what goes up, must come down."

In the ensuing chapters, David's son, Solomon comes to power and almost as soon as his humble prayer for wisdom is granted and he builds a glorious temple for God, events begin to spiral out of control. Solomon builds military strongholds by using slave labor and worse still, he turns away his heart from God by worshiping the false, foreign gods of his many wives. And of course, a divided kingdom cannot stand so it becomes separated into a northern kingdom, named Israel, and a southern kingdom, named Judah. If this isn't tragic enough, the story continues naming one king after another who is described in this way, "Now Omri (the name of a king) did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; he did more evil than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:25). And then, only verses later in chapter sixteen, "Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all those who were before him." Among those acts of evil was King Ahab had married Jezebel and built an altar to *her* god, and worshiped Baal, and this clearly provoked the anger of the Lord.

So, are you catching on to why I started out with, "what goes up, must come down?" Because undeniably, things have come crashing down in a thunderous manner. And yet... and yet, what we heard in our preaching text today is that God is always

ready and able—not only to offer, but to provide life in the midst of death and despair. In the very opening verse of I Kings 17, we hear what we might say is the first salvo in the battle between the Lord God and the false gods that Israel's kings had been turning their hearts toward. Seemingly out of nowhere, we are introduced to Elijah, a man whose very name is a message. Elijah literally means, *My God is Yahweh*. And the word of God given to Elijah is that only the Lord God has power to make it rain. This word is in direct opposition to the belief that Baal, the Canaanite god of vegetation and rain, has any power whatsoever.

So the stage is set in a time of drought, a time of scarcity, an especially hard time for those who live on the margins. In this series of three stories, God does the very opposite of what we come to expect. The notion that what goes up, must come down is turned on its head. In the first story, Elijah is passively obedient. The word of the Lord tells him, “Go from here and turn eastward” and so on. We hear that Elijah “went and did according to the word of the Lord.” The prophet is the model of obedience in contrast to the time in the wilderness when the people of Israel were more than once full of complaints about not having food and meat and water. But here God provides both water through a fickle stream (a wadi) *and* meat and bread are brought by ravens, an animal that was considered unclean. Some scholars believe the ravens serve as an idiom for bedouins, a nomadic, foreign people. In any case, it seems to indicate that we ought to be ready to accept God's providence through widely various means.

On this All Saints Sunday, we might reflect on who have been those unexpected saints and angels who have cared for us in our moments of need? This story ends though with a return to reality; because there was no rain, the wadi dried up. This is a clear indication to us that God's provision is not ultimate. We are always in a sense on the margins and must live with faith, trusting in God to provide us with our daily bread.

“Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah] saying, ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon and live there...’” As the song I began with says, ‘the spinning wheel keeps spinning’ and yet this new word of the Lord has Elijah being told to go deep into the heartland of Baal's turf, so to speak. Queen Jezebel is from Sidon and Elijah is being

called upon to go now, live there, and depend upon the hospitality of a widow there to feed you. Oh, and lest we forget, we are still very much in a time of severe drought. Even so, we are told, “Elijah set out and went to Zarephath.” When Elijah arrives at the gate, we encounter the widow as one who seems terribly inadequate for the task of supporting herself, let alone a guest. The poor woman finds herself trapped between the demands of ancient hospitality and the harsh reality of famine and this serves to greatly build the tension.

And we are led to think, ‘Seriously, what are you up to now, God?’ We feel almost embarrassed by Elijah’s requests, “Bring me water so that I may drink” and “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” The woman responds with an oath, “As the Lord *your* God lives, I have nothing...” Not surprisingly, she recognizes him as a foreigner but her response only speaks of scarcity and a fatalistic resignation. There’s nothing... only a handful of meal, a little oil, a couple of sticks. I will go, I will prepare it, we will eat it, then we will die.

To this however, Elijah tells her, “Do not fear.” His message of “Fear not” is like that of an angel when they come with a word of good news. Elijah tells her to first bring something for him and then make something for yourself and your son. And Elijah promises her that the jar will not be emptied and the jug will not fail until the Lord will send rain on the earth. Now I want us to pause to think about what you or I might do in such a situation. If you had as little as this widow has, would you do what is asked of you? It’s a provocative question, is it not? But for most all of us, we are not in such dire straits, in fact we are far from it! Just what does it say about us who have so much yet so often are unwilling to provide anything to those who are here from foreign nations and are in desperate need? Rather than showing them gracious hospitality, many of us want them to just go back to where they came from—or we want them kept in custody until we can forcibly return them to their country of origin, even if it might mean their lives would be in grave danger. This widow causes me to ask how ready and willing am I (and us together) “to entertain angels unawares?”

In any case, the woman does just that and we learn that “she as well as Elijah and her household ate for many days.” And this happened “according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.” So though the stakes were significantly higher, the God who lives is able to grant life in the midst of death.

And with that, we come to the third of our stories and the greatest challenge. The woman’s son becomes ill and “his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.” Being in the midst of a pandemic that affects our lungs and causes us to lose all breath, this story is particularly poignant. There is no reason given for his death, although in the woman’s pain and grief we hear her anger and feel compassion because we have all been there. In the face of undeserved suffering, we so desperately want answers to the unanswerable questions of “Why? Why me? Why my son?”

Elijah doesn’t offer any platitudes and neither does he chastise her. And now he is not passive at all but he takes decisive action. He asks the woman, “Give me your son.” He then takes the woman’s child unto himself and does some crying as well. He prays and stretches himself out upon the child three times. The purpose of that action is unclear but what is clear is that Elijah’s crying out, his prayer to the Lord is effective as he says, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” And God listens to Elijah’s voice and the child has his life come into him again. Elijah returns the boy to his mother, “See, your son is alive.” And what we and the woman discover is that when faced with the ultimate test, can God provide a resounding “Yes!” to the question if there can be life after death! The woman who was full of doubt and even hostility in her grief is now moved to make her own confession of faith, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

God’s response to death is resurrection—what goes down will come up again. And even though the water in the brook dries up, the flour and the oil do not last forever, the boy will eventually die, God’s power and goodness are still there for us. Like the saints who from their labors rest, we are called to lean into their example and live this difficult and joyful life while trusting God again, and again, and again. Amen