

“Faith in the Face of Circumstance”
a sermon on 1 Kings: 17:1-24; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38—13:2
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November 12, 2006
Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Note: I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters at Germantown Mennonite Church.

Our story from First Kings starts simply enough. Ahab forsakes Yahweh for Jezebel and Baal. So Elijah challenges Baal head on: “As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” And Baal is rendered impotent. The storm god, bringer of rain, abundance, and fertility simply dries up.

But what happens when the gods fail? In that religion and economy, one traded servitude for rain. Sacrifice for crops. But the religion that promised economic security—prosperity for humble obedience—failed to deliver.

What do we do when religion dries up? What but, like the Widow of Zarephath, gather sticks for a last meal before dying?

Too many of us know this story. The religion that ordered our youth no longer supplies meaning. The notion that “to everything there is a purpose” (however hidden) no longer justifies the damage left in its wake. What comfort is it that God controls Baal’s weather if the weak starve? Who cares if God inconveniences Ahab and Jezebel in their palace and insults their union of god and country if—in Zarephath—a widow gathers twigs for one last meal with her son—so that, as she tells Elijah, “we may eat it, and die.”

To what purpose does God fill the jar with meal and the jug with oil only to let a child die? The widow’s despair exposes life’s futility: “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!”

Orderly religion taught us to defend God to the end. “Your son is in a better place.” “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Not the widow of Zarephath. She declares her terrible truth. She decries God’s unforgiving lack of grace. She moves Elijah to likewise accuse God: “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” And heaven is moved to reverse itself, to heal the child, to commit resurrection.

Nine hundred years later, in the time of Jesus, little had changed. Religious institutions of Jesus’ day still failed to deliver. In today’s Gospel lesson, he warns his followers, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of

honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." The Temple economy feeds the powerful, leaving widows homeless. (New Orleans wasn't the first place that those who praise God and Country left the poor dying.)

In today's Gospel lesson, like that from the Hebrew Scriptures, a widow lives at the end of her resources. Recent scholars have noted that the comment that Jesus made about her two-penny offering can be read two ways. "She, out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." The words might compliment self-sacrificial stewardship. But they could just as well lament a system that requests tokens of the wealthy while demanding a whole living of the destitute.

Do we see this widow as a model of stewardship for religious institutions? Or do we see her casting her last resources defiantly in the face of God and God's institutions, exposing an unjust marriage of religion and economy?

How do the faithful live at the end of resources?

What do we do when the invisible hand does not profit all?

What do we do when the religion of our youth no longer supplies rain?

What do we do when the community of our youth devours us?

Do we dry up as victims? Or do we resolutely gather sticks for one last meal?

Do we meekly become invisible? Or do we throw our circumstances in the face of God to demand change—even shattering familiar structures. Note that immediately after this incident, Jesus' declares the whole system will fall: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Faith at the end of its resources lives stubbornly. Faith in the face of impossible circumstances, defiantly assails heaven. The epistle reading appointed in the lectionary for this morning, comes from the letter to the Hebrews [reading just 9:24-26].

For Christ didn't go into a holy place made by human hands, a copy of the real one. Christ went into heaven itself and now appears on our behalf in the presence of God. High priests of old went into the Most Holy Place every year with the blood of an animal. But Christ didn't make a self-offering more than that one time; otherwise, Christ would have had to suffer many times ever since the creation of the world. But now that the consummation is upon us, Christ has appeared once and for all, to remove sin through self-sacrifice.

For all its difficult appeal to sacrificial symbolism and systems that I don't grasp, I love the imagery of Christ marching into heaven, demanding not a copy but the real thing, insisting that God fix things once and for all.

Faith demands that things be fixed once and for all. Too many of us were taught acquiescence and meek humility are the path to salvation. We've been assured that

submission to teachings and documents and tradition are the price we must pay. We must sacrifice—whether it be our intellect, our minds, our sexuality, or even our radical peace and justice work—to maintain the connections and secure the resources we need.

For years we gathered what sticks we could only to see the child, the faith we clung to, die anyway. But now we demand resurrection. We cast the last of our resources in the face of the divine and demand things be fixed once and for all. We envision a church that embraces all the complex realities of human existence, a church empowered to renew the world.

This is the Gospel. God faces impossible circumstances—the powers of authority and control. Yet God, despite the destructive corruption of our fear, embraces human existence. God, in Christ Jesus, casts a final lot with humanity.

In Christ Jesus, God marches inexorably to the cross, exposes the impotence of the powerful, and demands new life.

Faith in the face of impossible circumstance demands a new creation embracing all aspects of existence. It gathers its sticks, knowing death is likely but demanding more. It hurls its coins down in defiance of a religion that denies human worth—ready to risk the temple's foundational stones for the possibilities of God's transforming love.

Faith, at the end of its resources, faces life's circumstance. It takes up the cross and follows Jesus.

And it demands resurrection.