

“The Plight of Elijah”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #1

I Kings 17:1-24

[title slide] *Welcome and prayer.*

[Farmer and horse] Things are not always what they first seem. There is an old Chinese parable commonly called “The Farmer and His Lost Horse” that illustrates this truth. It goes like this:

A farmer loses his horse one day. His stallion simply runs away. His neighbors all come to him and say, “How unfortunate for you!” The farmer replies, “How do you know my loss will not become a blessing?”

Sure enough, the next day, his horse returns with a beautiful mare at its side. Again, his neighbors gather, this time saying, “What a beautiful mare! Truly this is a blessing for you.” To which the farmer replies, “How do you know this is a blessing and not unfortunate for me?”

The farmer’s son takes to taming the new mare. In the process, the wild horse bucks him off, breaking his leg. Again the neighbors say, “How terrible for you! Your son broke his leg!” And again the farmer says, “How do you know this is bad news and not a blessing?”

Soon, war breaks out in the country. All the young men are conscripted to fight in the army, except for the farmer’s son, who is still recovering. I think in the original tale, the cycle of blessings and accidents continue a few more times, but by now, I’m sure the neighbors learned not to say anything.

[cart-in camping] Life is like that. Something we take as a blessing can become a curse and vice versa. For instance, just last week my boys and I were camping in Minnesota at a “cart-in” site. We didn’t know at first, but the campsite was 2/3 mile from the parking lot. I thought it was just a few hundred feet. Instead, we had to make two long trips through mosquito-infested forest, getting our gear to our site. A cart was provided, but I admit, we were not feeling great the longer we walked.

[Lake Superior Beach] After we got set up, we discovered we basically had a private beach. We also had bear-proof food locker. My best and worst moment was thinking, “Shoot. There’s no pump or well. How are we going to wash the

dishes?” before I realized I literally had three quadrillion gallons of pure Lake Superior water a stone’s throw away, if I was willing to carry it up a rocky cliff. After all was said and done, we decided it was our favorite campsite.

[Title slide] First impressions are can be misleading, whether good or bad. Things most often are not what they seem, nor do they fit neatly into categories.

The Christ faith also has its ups and downs. No single moment of our walk with Jesus defines our lives. Rather, we experience a series of steps, events and emotions. Listen up, Church: if you’re only looking for instant gratification and perfection, Christianity is going to disappoint you. But if you’re looking for a God and Savior who will be with you in the long haul, no matter what, keep listening.

That cart-in campsite is an apt metaphor of the life and ministry of the prophet Elijah. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in Israel’s history. He also experienced a crazy number of ups and downs. In the next three weeks, we are going to examine his story while asking ourselves, how do we respond to fear and disappointment?

[Elijah and Ahab] Elijah’s challenge was teaching his people to stop worshipping false idols and to worship only God. His biggest enemies were King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. 1st Kings 16:30 says Ahab “did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.” Ahab oppressed the poor, encouraged idol worship, and even sacrificed children. Ahab was such a terrible king, Elijah prophesied a three-year-long drought in the whole country. (1 Kings 17:1)

Imagine God calls you into ministry. What do you think God will have you do? Preach, pray, lead, heal? Certainly. Prophecy a drought where hundreds of people will die because of one man’s evil deeds? That’s not the first thing that came to my mind when the bishop ordained me!

[Elijah in the desert] Elijah was a prophet, a mouthpiece for God. To many of us, that sounds like a decent job – at least it should be easy to trust your boss, right? Not necessarily. Immediately after prophesying the drought, Elijah is driven into the desert, without a cart, tent, or provisions. The drought starts. It’s not going to be easy finding food or water. I imagine Elijah thought, “This is going to be terrible.” Instead, God sends ravens to bring food to Elijah. Elijah goes from a tragedy to a miracle. This wouldn’t be the only time.

[Elijah and widow] When the ravens fly off and the brook runs dry, God sends Elijah to the widow of Zarephath. This is another weird twist, a chance for fear and despair to overwhelm them both. Elijah is worried about a king coming to kill him. The widow is worried about a famine killing her family. It's a strange story of scarcity and abundance, and the miracles God can do if we show a little faith.

Understand, foreign widows were about the lowest people in ancient society. They were poor and had few rights. They had no one to provide for them or protect them. They were the last people you would expect help from. And Elijah has the audacity to ask her for a drink and some food. So what happens? The widow, as she's getting ready to starve, says, "Sure. Why not?" Then God provides a miracle by making sure her flour and oil don't run out.

[Elijah has a meal with the widow and son] Checking the scoreboard, so far we have one prophet, one famine, one angry king, one widow, and two miracles. The widow has plenty of food for herself, her son, and her guest, Elijah. But the story is far from over. Just when it seems everything is going great, something else bad happens.

Having a prophet of the one true God as a guest of honor in your home would seem like a good thing. Imagine the conversations you could have. But instead of a blessing, a curse happens. The widow's only son dies.

[1 Kings 17:17-18] Let me read verses 17-18 to you.

"Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" (1 Kings 17:17-18)

[Widow yells at Elijah] Have you ever been really angry at someone? Especially someone you expected to help you? I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a spouse and then a child, let alone my only child. I can imagine the rage in this poor widow's voice. "You jerk! First you cause a famine that kills hundreds of people and angers a powerful king. Then you come here and don't even have the decency to keep my son from dying? What kind of prophet are you, anyway? Get out of my house! I never want to see you again!" I'd be angry,

too. The widow put her faith in a prophet from a different country and a different religion, and she was disappointed.

When we despair, do we turn to God? Do we, in our darkest times, still have a mustard seed of faith? Do we really think God can do anything, or are we resigned to accept our circumstances?

I wonder what was Elijah thinking. He was the one who experienced God’s calling. Did he doubt his own ministry? Certainly. Did he want to give up? Absolutely. Did he trust God? Well, let’s read on in verses 19-24.

[1 Kings 17:19-24 – (2 slides)] “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”

The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”

Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.” (1 Kings 17:19-24)

[Elijah prays] Elijah’s ability to empathize with this widow was one of his greatest gifts. Elijah did not know if God would heal the boy, but he was willing to pray. Elijah did not know, even after the ravens and the never-ending flour and oil, if God would hear him and grant his request. Still, Elijah tried, and God moved.

[Widow and son] Because of Elijah’s courage and empathy, and because of this miracle, the widow believed in God. She believe Elijah’s words. The curse of the famine led to the blessing to the food. The curse of the son dying led to his resurrection and her renewed faith. Curse, blessing, curse, blessing. Having to drag your supplies nearly a mile into a forest and then finding a beautiful beach. Who are we to try to define an experience into a single word, good or bad?

[roller coaster] Early in my ministry, I was greatly influenced by pastor and author Mike Yaconelli. He wrote the book, Dangerous Wonder. Mike always said that following Jesus was a roller-coaster ride. You say, “Yes, Lord,” and suddenly you’re strapped in and rushing through a series of ups and downs, peaks and valleys, clinging to Jesus for dear life.

[Scripture] That is what Elijah learned. That is what the widow learned. Christianity is not about easy answers, prosperity, and blessing. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3, 10.) We expect trouble in this world, and we expect, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome it. (John 16:33)

I will never forget what a speaker said at a winter retreat. “Without trials, only spoiled brats would enter heaven.” I’m not saying we should all be masochists. Nobody likes pain! Nobody enjoys cancer. Nobody rejoices at a funeral. But in the midst of our tears, we can still laugh. We can still hope.

[Scripture] James 1:2-3 says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” I don’t seek trials, but they come to me anyway. I have come to realize, I have a choice. I can consider what those events are going to do for me. I can trust God, have a long-term view, and think of how God is changing me, helping me persevere, giving me empathy for those, like the widow, who suffer not because of their own fault, but because of bad decisions by people in power.

[title slide] Maybe you and I are not prophets, not in the way that Elijah was, but God still wants to use us to provide miracles to others. I’m thinking about members of our church who right now need our support and prayers for the battles they are facing. What widows and widowers do we have in our very midst? Who struggles in their marriage, with their children, with their finances? Are we going to use the faith and resources God has given us to help, or will we sink into despair? The choice is ours.

James 5:17 says Elijah was a human, just like us, and when he prayed, miracles happened. Droughts toppled kings. Birds fed prophets. Oil and flour fed

the poor, the widows, and the orphans. Dead sons were given back to their mothers, alive. I wouldn't choose any of those things to happen to me. I don't think you would either. Yet by faith, we can learn to see how God uses everything that happens to us to build up the kingdom of heaven. We just have to let God work through every experience, not necessarily trusting our first impressions.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: James 5:17-18

“Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

Reflection Questions

1. Who has been a prophet in your life? Who has provided for you in a desperate need or spoken a important word of encouragement to you?
2. Sometimes blessings come unexpectedly, and so do challenges. When have you experienced the "rollercoaster" of both in a short time?
3. How do you think the widow felt the first time Elijah asked her for help? How do you think she felt during the miracle of never-ending bread and oil?
4. Do you think the widow blamed Elijah for the death of her son? How would it have felt for her to receive her son back alive?
5. How can the story of Elijah and the widow be encouragement to you today? How can it be an encouragement to someone you know?