

## *Helpless?*

Psalm 146, 1 Kings 17:8-24

Whitefish UMC

June 6, 2010

- † “We can fly to the moon and back how many times?” Eric Authement, a Louisiana fisherman, asked as he watched a video feed of oil spewing from the underwater leak. “And we cannot stop up a damn well.”
- † That comment about sums up the level of frustration and helplessness felt by most Americans these days, but it is especially acute for those whose livelihood depends on the Gulf of Mexico. Everywhere you turn, whether among conservatives, liberals, or those somewhere in between, people are upset, depressed, angry toward, and critical of their leaders, whether corporate or political.
- † Columnists who can usually be counted upon to support the current administration in Washington can now be depended upon to slam the President for being too unemotional and disconnected from the crisis in the Gulf. The feisty Maureen Dowd writes: “[The President’s] battle against water is taking on Biblical—even Job-like—proportions. Instead of buoyant, he seems put upon. Instead of the fairy dust of hopefulness, there’s a bitter draught of helplessness.”
- † African American columnist Charles M. Blow wants the President to “start feeling it,” and get angry and empathize with the anger of others.
- † But David Brooks, moderately conservative columnist for the New York Times, and a practicing Jew, must have read the church’s lectionary texts for today from the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps he had Psalm 146, which we read

responsively this morning, in mind when he wrote his column that describes the limits of government to address the huge problems our country faces.

- † “Meanwhile, the biggest problems are intractable. There’s no sign we will be successful in preventing a nuclear Iran. Especially after Monday’s events [the debacle that ensued when Israel boarded a Turkish ship delivering relief supplies to Gaza], there’s no chance of creating a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Unemployment will not be coming down soon. The long-term fiscal crisis won’t be addressed soon either.”
- † No wonder the country is depressed and feeling helpless. As if on cue, the psalmist sings: “Put not your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;...”
- † All right, then. When we’re about to lose hope, trust God, pray and praise God. Always good advice, but....doesn’t God work through people? Who then, can we trust?
- † Which brings us to the scripture from the Hebrew bible, the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. By now you have noticed that the Bible is full of the actions of ordinary people whose actions change the course of history. When we are willing to trust God, the smallest, most ordinary action can produce the most life-changing and history changing results.
- † So it is with this early story in the life of Elijah, who would one day challenge the prophets of the pagan god Baal on Mt. Carmel and become a legendary figure in the history of ancient Israel. So great was Elijah that people in Jesus’ time wondered if John the Baptist was Elijah returned—and

many Jews still await the appearance of Elijah as the predecessor of the Messiah.

- † When Elijah was still young in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, Ahab became king of Israel. The first book of Kings summarizes his reign by saying: “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.” Ahab was indeed a wicked king.
- † To top it off, he married the legendary Jezebel, an evil and idolatrous woman, who convinced Ahab to set up idols to fertility and war goddesses in the capital city of Samaria. When we first encounter Elijah, he is being sent to warn Ahab that what is doing will destroy Israel.
- † Elijah is just a backwoods boy from Gilead, and there is nothing in his background that would induce Ahab to listen. He wasn’t from a powerful family, he wasn’t wealthy, he wasn’t even a priest.
- † Elijah announced to Ahab during their first meeting that because of the evil behavior of the king, it wouldn’t rain until Elijah said so. Jezebel and Ahab must have laughed and jeered at these prophecies, because then Elijah disappeared, back to Gilead and into a mountainous wilderness that he knew well. He went to hide out, where he was fed by ravens and lived next to a clear mountain stream.
- † Down in Israel, the spring rains never came. A terrible drought threatened the land. Ahab began to look for Elijah. And even in Elijah’s hideout, the stream dried up and the ravens quit coming with food. Throughout the land, people became fearful and anxious. It affected Elijah, too.
- † Could he trust that God would provide? Throughout his life, Elijah was prone to swings of doubt and faith, courageous action and paralyzing anxiety, just as we are. He was challenged to trust in God’s care, but imagine what he must have thought when God sent him to a new location—

100 miles away—to the little village of Zarephath. And the town was so close to Jezebel’s hometown—and in the heart of Gentile territory.

- † If this was God’s plan B, Elijah must have wondered, what would plan C look like? Sound familiar? But Elijah was faithful to God’s call, and he traveled to Zarephath. When he arrived, he encountered a poor widow—a single mom—with tons of problems of her own. Elijah asked her for a cup of water and a small cake of bread.
- † The widow began collecting sticks. She planned to light a small fire to take the last of her resources to make one final meal for her son and herself before they would surely starve to death. Nevertheless, at Elijah’s request, she was willing to provide hospitality one more time.
- † And everyday, Elijah, the widow, and her son ate a little cake together, and day after day there was enough. Even when her son became ill, Elijah and the widow, their trust in God made strong, offered him to God, who held them all in wholeness and faithfulness.
- † What gave Elijah and the widow the ability to trust in God, to pray and praise? And to back up words with courageous deeds?
- † H. James Hopkins writes: “I know this. I know that my friend Rufus Watson loved this story. Rufus, who lived to be ninety-nine years old, was born in Texas, the son of former slaves. He served his country in the military. He pitched in the Negro professional leagues. He made some money investing in real estate. He witnessed lynchings and spent a lifetime wondering how people commit such atrocities and still go to church and call themselves Christians.
- † He found comfort in the story of Elijah and the widow. He said if his life was not proof enough, this story showed that God meets people at the

bottom of the barrel. ‘That’s where God meets us, Jim, at bottom of the barrel. God meets us when we’ve gone so low that all we can do is look up.’

- † If Rufus trusted God to meet him at life’s low points, if Elijah trusted God to meet him at life’s low points, if God met the widow and Elijah at the point where the grain, the oil, and the water were running out, I guess we are well advised to do the same and trust God, too. We can hold on to our questions of God—[what about plan D?] They are not inconsequential or invalid.
- † Elijah probably held on to his questions. He just spoke his faith and backed up his faith with actions. Of course let’s not forget about king Ahab—fuming about Elijah’s impudence, wishing someone would do something to make it rain. We could always put our trust in him.”
- † But we know better, or do we? It’s so easy to get into the habit of pointing the finger at someone to blame them and demand that they do something, anything to fix the mess we’re in. Instead, we’re called to follow the psalmist and Elijah, the widow, and Rufus, and all of those people who act with hospitality and grace and compassion and action despite the odds against them.
- † Are we helpless? No, for when we look up, lift our eyes to the hills, we know from where our help comes. It comes from God, the creator of heaven and earth. As we seek to follow Jesus, God in the flesh, who trusted God even unto the cross, who voiced his doubts but stayed faithful through his life and in his death, by the power of God’s spirit, we are led to listen and speak and act for the healing of the world.
- † Although our voice, our love, our action may seem insignificant, history turns on our faithfulness and trust—not in the equivalent to the princes and powers of politics and technology—but in wisdom, compassion, and building GOD’s kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

† As Jesus offered himself for the healing of the world, we accept his love and resurrected life into ours. In the sacrament of Holy Communion, we receive strength and hope and trust, for we remember that on the night....

Sources:

H. James Hopkins in Feasting on the Word, WJK, 2010.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Hayner, "Turning Points," <http://day1.org>

David Brooks, "The Oil Plume," New York Times, May 31, 2010.

Maureen Dowd, "A Storyteller Loses the Story Line," New York Times, June 1, 2010.

Charles M. Blow, "Give Them Something They Can Feel," New York Times, May 28, 2010.