

Sermon (6/5/16, 1 Kings 17: 8-24):

The prophet Elijah appears on the scene seemingly out of nowhere. All of a sudden, we find him in the court of King Ahab announcing that Ahab's administration has been put on notice. A great drought will overcome the land because of Ahab's corrupt and unfaithful ways. Ahab will suffer, the land will suffer, the people will suffer.

It's not the best of ways to make your first appearance but prophets are truth tellers and sometimes such truth telling packs a wallop as is surely the case with Elijah.

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It is said that faith and politics do not mix well and should be avoided at all costs but, unfortunately, no one seems to have told God that. Over and over again we see God's intervention into the political systems of the day – particularly in regards to Israel but also with leaders and countries far beyond Israel's borders.

Ahab was a particularly bad King. His wife, Queen Jezebel, was even worse. Among other things, she came from a country that worshipped the cultic god Baal and, after marrying Ahab, she made sure Baal replaced Yahweh as the official religion of the royal court. This is Israel, mind you. Yahweh's home turf.

The Bible tells us that Ahab had angered God like no other King before him and that's saying something. Yes, we heard right, political systems anger God. As much as we might like and even try to cubby hole such things into unassociated categories, it does not seem to fly well with God. There is no such thing as 'It's just politics' or 'It's just business'. There is no such thing as it not being personal, at least where God is concerned. Repeatedly, we see that for God it's all personal-personal enough that there are times when God can't help but to get involved.

Not surprisingly, Elijah's words are not taken well and he is quickly run out of town. On the lam, Elijah first finds himself at a small Wadi or ravine that usually only has water in it during rainy seasons. While there, God sends Ravens to feed him.

Not the most appealing thought, especially after just recently viewing a black bird feeding its young near our birdfeeder. The Mom seemed to

pick up anything and everything she could find in the grass and shoved it into the baby's mouth just to keep it quiet. I hate to think what those Ravens brought Elijah.

Eventually the Wadi dries up as the drought takes hold and Elijah is sent packing again straight into Jezebel's home territory to a widow in Sidon. A most unlikely source of safety and sustenance given the dire circumstances of widows in that day who tended to have few means to care for themselves let alone anyone else.

As the scene unfolds, we are presented with a most unlikely pair, driven together by the mysterious purposes of the Divine. A Sidon widow – an outsider, maybe even a devotee of the cultic religion of Baal.

A prophet named Elijah - a fugitive on the run from an angry Ahab who has it out for him.

Both of their lives hang in a precarious balance as this test of wills between God and Ahab plays out.

The environment for mistrust abounds. While God promised Elijah this widow would sustain him, apparently the widow missed the memo and, even if she had not, she did not possess the means to do so. Her situation was dire. So dire that when Elijah asked her for food and drink, she told him she could not help. All she had was enough for a final meal for her and her son. After that, they would wait for the inevitable – death.

While these two strangers had little in common, they did share a common desperation born out of the failed policies of the corrupt political structures Ahab and Jezebel had instituted. The widow was in her position of desperation because Ahab had failed to meet his responsibility of caring for society's vulnerable – an expectation of Israel's Kings in those days. Elijah was in a position of desperation as a fugitive from Ahab's wrath. Both were also caught in the cross fire of God's attack on Ahab.

Their best and only hope was to risk trust in each other and the God who had brought them together.

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In one of the Indiana Jones movies, there's a scene where Indiana and his side kick come to the edge of a chasm so deep that the bottom of it cannot be seen. Somehow they need to get to the other side but how?

After all they had been through and all they had endured, their quest seemed to have hit a dead end.

They read again the cryptic poem that has led them on this journey. It instructs them that they should not be deterred but turn in a certain direction and step out into the chasm. From all appearances, to do so would lead to certain death. Refusing to be deterred, however, in good character, our hero, Indiana, decides to take a chance. Holding his breath, he stretches out his leg into the chasm, steps forward, and, lo and behold, his foot lands on solid ground. It turns out that the chasm is an optical illusion. Blended ever so exactly with the chasm's walls is a solid path of stone leading across the chasm. Indiana risked trusting a poem that had gotten them this far and, once again, it did not let him down.

Life is filled with risks. We try to minimize them – to practice with a safety net until it hurts, to calculate the probabilities of success, to explore and test the ground with painstaking care, to anticipate every contingency in case something goes wrong. Even so, risk is unavoidable. At some point we must stretch out our leg into the chasm, hoping our foot will land on solid ground.

Being born is a risk as we leave the safety of the womb. Stepping onto that school bus and moving out of the line of sight of parents feels risky for child and parent alike. Saying 'yes' to that new job, a new relationship, a new place to call home, a new endeavor, a new way of doing things, even a new perspective feels risky. Sometimes even getting out of bed feels risky!

You can almost hear Elijah's prayer when he first sees this widow scrounging for sticks.

"Really God? This is your plan? This is the person who is going to save me?"

Equally, you can almost hear the mumblings of the widow when she spies this wild man off in the distance.

"Really? Isn't the fact that I'm trying to scrounge up enough for a final meal for me and my son enough? Now there's this wild looking man coming towards me who will do who knows what to me?!"

As bad as things looked, both of these people would need to take a

risk on each other if they were to survive. Both of these people would need to risk trusting in the One who had brought them together.

‘Sir,’ Says the widow to Elijah. ‘I have no food or water to offer. Things are bad...really bad. I can’t risk giving away what little I have to love my neighbor. I can’t risk my meager resources to be generous. I can’t risk my time, my energy, my savings on you and this God who sent you no matter how worthwhile it seems. It would be sheer lunacy! Go away! Stay out! Go back to where you came from!’

‘Okay,’ Elijah responds. ‘Go and do as you say. Make that last meal for you and your son and then wait for the buzzards to start circling over your head. Go ahead, I won’t get in your way, but before you do, try, just try, taking this one little risk. Make one little cake for me from what you have and you will see that the God who has brought us together will not let you or me down.’

That is one tall order isn’t it? No lengthy scientific studies, no exploration of one’s risk tolerance, no complicated calculations of probabilities...just go and do. Risk faith in a dangerous world. Risk faith in an earthly shackled reality based solely on figures, facts, debits, and credits. Risk love in a world that is keen on safely cubby holing faith away so that politics can be politics and business can be business without God getting in the way to mess things up. The widow is faced with a tough choice.

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My guess is that the reason many of you are here today is because you are looking for faith. A kind of faith that is resilient and dependable. A kind of faith that will give you hope even when the going gets tough and everything feels like it’s falling apart as it did for this widow and Elijah. A kind of faith that will make the presence of God feel real and certain.

Unfortunately, I have some bad news. As it is with so much of life, faith requires risk. Yes, faith requires taking a risk on the One who has taken a risk on us, even the risk of giving his life for us. If a dynamic, living, life sustaining faith is what you seek, playing it safe, keeping one foot on the pier and the other in the boat, will only get your pants torn. I

wish I could tell you otherwise and maybe there are those who can but, for me at least, from the often painful lessons I have lived through, faith without risk is not faith. Risking the demands of loving God and loving neighbor in the voting booth, in the budgets we create, on the stranger we meet on the road, and even in the way we measure our time, our bank accounts, and our priorities is a must.

So the widow did as Elijah asked. She took not her leftovers, but the very substance of what she and her son had left, and she baked Elijah a cake, tiny though it probably was. She took a risk and, lo and behold, just as Elijah had promised, God did not let that jar of meal and jug of oil fail until the drought had ended. She risked her resources that seemed so meager and happily discovered that there was more than enough for all.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.