

“Trust in Times of Trauma”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 13, 2022

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 Kings 17: 8-16 Luke 4: 16-27

1 Kings 17:8-16 (The Message)

⁷⁻⁹ Eventually the brook dried up because of the drought. Then God spoke to him: “Get up and go to Zarephath in Sidon and live there. I’ve instructed a woman who lives there, a widow, to feed you.”

¹⁰⁻¹¹ So he got up and went to Zarephath. As he came to the entrance of the village he met a woman, a widow, gathering firewood. He asked her, “Please, would you bring me a little water in a jug? I need a drink.” As she went to get it, he called out, “And while you’re at it, would you bring me something to eat?”

¹² She said, “I swear, as surely as your God lives, I don’t have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we’ll die.”

¹³⁻¹⁴ Elijah said to her, “Don’t worry about a thing. Go ahead and do what you’ve said. But first make a small biscuit for me and bring it back here. Then go ahead and make a meal from what’s left for you and your son. This is the word of the God of Israel: ‘The jar of flour will not run out and the bottle of oil will not become empty before God sends rain on the land and ends this drought.’”

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ And she went right off and did it, did just as Elijah asked. And it turned out as he said—daily food for her and her family. The jar of meal didn’t run out and the bottle of oil didn’t become empty: God’s promise fulfilled to the letter, exactly as Elijah had delivered it!

Luke 4:16-30 (The Message)

¹⁶⁻²¹ He came to Nazareth where he had been raised. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God’s Spirit is on me;

he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and

recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free,

to announce, “This is God’s time to shine!”

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.”

²² All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one we’ve known since he was just a kid?”

²³⁻²⁷ He answered, "I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.' Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown. Isn't it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land, but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Sarepta in Sidon? And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸⁻³⁰ That set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger. They threw him out, banishing him from the village, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom, but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

Sermon

The Lord will provide.

When scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we find a variety of stories and psalms
that encourage us to love one another and to practice hospitality in community.

We are richly blessed with the story in First Kings
about Elijah and the widow and her son.

The prophet Elijah was hungry and wandering during a terrific drought and famine
when he arrived at the home of a widow and her son at the village gate.

Even though they had very little to spare,
a place was made for him.

The widow and her son's act of hospitality and generosity
resulted in God's blessing their home
with a boundless supply of what all three would need to live.

That is why when unexpected company arrives, we "set a place for Elijah."

My family lived in Spanish Harlem in New York City.

We were intimately acquainted with scarcity and generosity,
experiencing both in our own home and our community.

So our family of six set a seventh place at the dinner table for Elijah,
and invariably the extra seat and plate and silverware would be used.

Elijah, I can testify, has many faces, names, needs and hopes.

One fellow from Ecuador was a barber,
and he thanked – and surprised – my parents for their hospitality
by giving all four sons free crew cuts.

*(Mother was so surprised, and the barber was so pleased!
What could she say?!)*

We never worried about portions; there was always enough.

No one ever left the table hungry,

and if our dinner helpings were somewhat smaller than the night before,
the lively conversation more than made up for the lack of seconds.

Another Elijah, this one from Tennessee, happily graced our table most every night
as he conducted a law internship in NYC.

The year was 1973, and that summer the price of beef skyrocketed.

Throughout that hot summer

we ate chicken in all its glorious and varied forms.

Towards August our soft-spoken guest smiled and said in his Memphis accent,

"Mrs. Calvert, this morning on the way to work

I noticed something tingling on my back.

I felt behind my shoulders, and you know what I found?

Little wings! Little wings were sprouting!"

Mrs. Calvert understood perfectly well what the young prophet was saying,

and for the next few days poultry was stricken from the menu.

The Lord will provide.

When scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.

In our homes and in our churches and in our community gatherings

"set a place for Elijah" runs parallel to "the Lord will provide."

Yes, the Lord does provide, even and especially when entertaining angels unaware.

Our collective claiming of Elijah has its genesis in a command to serve an outsider:

⁸*Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying,*

⁹*"Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there;
for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."*

¹⁰*So he set out and went to Zarephath.*

When he came to the gate of the town,

a widow was there gathering sticks;

he called to her and said,

"Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

¹¹*As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said,*

"Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

¹²*But she said,*

*"As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked,
only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug;*

I am now gathering a couple of sticks,

*so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son,
that we may eat it, and die."*

The Lord told Elijah that the widow would feed him
because she had been commanded to.

Hmm.

How did that work out?

Even though she may have gotten the word,
she made other plans that did not involve a wandering prophet.
In her we can see every mother, every parent
who has suffered and scrimped and saved
to feed her children, denying herself for the sake of her beloved.
We can relate to her pain when she said to Elijah,
*"Buster, I don't need another mouth to feed. I have had it up to here.
As a matter of fact, there is just enough food and oil left for our last supper."*

With all due respect,
Elijah does come across as insensitive to her suffering.
Do you think he felt he needed to push past her initial "no"
in order to get to God's "yes"?
We teach our young people that "no" means "no",
and we need to respect one another's power and need to say so
when they choose to not participate in any act.

However, this is a positive example of one person of faith
gently, persuasively, faithfully pushing through and past
another soul's fear, hesitancy and insecurity
in order to get to trust.

Elijah could have said,
well, if you need to have your last supper, I'll move on.
Instead he rolled the dice and overcame her objections.
His affirmation of the widow tipped the scale;
he showed her that he trusted in the Lord to provide this one meal,
and to trust that there would be one more.
He offered her and her son
and even us
an opportunity to tap into trusting in God
in times of trauma, trials and travails.

For her part, what did she have to lose?
There was no Plan B; there was no food in the pantry; there was no alternative option.
Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to talk ourselves out of things than into them?
We are so good at making excuses
about why we should not serve or share,
why we can't sanction or sacrifice for another soul.
Truth be known, we can justify anything
when it comes to hoarding or holding out.

The widow looked at this crazy man of God, and she made a spot decision.
This would be the end of the sermon

and the end of the story
if she had not generously shared out of her scarcity.

Passover Seders in Jewish homes and synagogues
would never open the door to let Elijah in.
Jesus of Nazareth would not have been almost thrown off a cliff
by his hometown congregation
if he did not have the witness of Elijah and the widow
to point to as an example of Christian hospitality to sojourners.

Later on, when Jesus Christ asked his followers who they believed he was,
they would not have equated his hospitable nature
and the loving nurture of God
with the prophet Elijah.

When you and I talk about amazing acts of kindness and mercy
in the 10,000-year history of humanity,
this living example of generosity in the midst of scarcity would be absent,
and we would be the lesser for it.

The Good News is that we have this good news!
God saw the mother's suffering as well as that of her son,
and God had compassion on them.
God sent to her a persistent and persuasive follower,
and Elijah had compassion for them.
God gave to her the gift of a son and the will to survive,
and she had compassion for those in need in her midst.
The widow's trust in the Lord to provide
moved mountains and moved God.
She put aside her anger, her fear, her loss, her despair,
and she took on God's gift of trust.
She trusted that the Lord would provide.
And **the Lord provided** -- when scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.
She offered this odd sojourner at the gate
a portion of all that she and her son had left.

Which brings us to questions to ask ourselves.

Is there ever a good time to be hard-hearted?
Is there a good time to be stingy?
Or tight fisted?
Or so conceited as to think that the world revolves around us,
or owes us something, or entitles us to more, more than someone, anyone else?

Trust that the Lord will provide.
The Lord does not promise excess or extravagance.

Be satisfied with a sense of enough.

Trust in the Promises of God; It is Enough

Recognize that you may be the one the Lord needs to use to provide.

The Lord may need you to be the one

to help provide hospitality, a bite to eat, a kind word,
a smile, a gift of charity, an affirmation of hope.

You may become a small part of a grace-filled church, a God movement,
a mighty mission making straight a way in the desert,
making a way for the lost and the afraid, the seeker and the disinherited.

Trust that the Lord will support what the Lord wills to be and to become.

Trust that you may be commanded – yes, commanded! – to play a part.

Trust that the core of our response is God’s gift of the capacity to empathize.

Empathy

The Lord will provide empathy for the whole people of God.

You may have read “The New Yorker” magazine article by Paul Bloom (1).

In it Paul Bloom reminded us of a story:

In 2008, Karina Encarnacion, an eight-year-old girl from Missouri,
wrote to President-elect Barack Obama with some advice
about what kind of dog he should get for his daughters.

She also suggested

that he enforce recycling and ban unnecessary wars.

Obama wrote to thank her, and offered some advice of his own:

“If you don’t already know what it means,

I want you to look up the word ‘empathy’ in the dictionary.

I believe we don’t have enough empathy in our world today,

and it is up to your generation to change that.”

This wasn’t the first time President Obama spoke up for empathy.

Two years earlier, in a commencement address at Xavier University,
he discussed the importance of being able

“to see the world

through the eyes of those who are different from us—

the child who’s hungry,

the steelworker who’s been laid off,

the family who lost the entire life they built together

when the storm came to town.”

He went on,

*“When you think like this—
when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern
and empathize with the plight of others,
whether they are close friends or distant strangers—
it becomes harder not to act,
harder not to help.”*

The word “empathy”—a rendering of the German *Einfühlung*, “feeling into”—
is only a century old, but people have been interested for a long time
in the moral implications of feeling our way into the lives of others.

In this sense, empathy is an instinctive mirroring of others’ experience.

The psychologist C. Daniel Batson calls this “the empathy-altruism hypothesis.”

Batson has found that simply instructing his subjects

to take another’s perspective

made them more caring and more likely to help.

In 1949, Kathy Fiscus, a three-year-old girl,

fell into a well in San Marino, California,

and the entire nation was captivated by concern.

Four decades later, America was transfixed by the plight of Jessica McClure

—Baby Jessica—

the 18-month-old who fell into a narrow well in Texas, in October, ‘87,

triggering a 58-hour rescue operation.

President Ronald Reagan remarked,

*“Everybody in America became godmothers and godfathers of Jessica
while this was going on.”*

The immense power of empathy has been demonstrated again and again.

It’s why when tornados swept through Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee,

many of us here gave generously and sacrificially to Week of Compassion.

The Lord will provide.

When scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.

One day in the early 1950s

my parents sent my eldest brothers David and Jonathan outside to play.

We lived in one of a row of tenements in Spanish Harlem.

There was a safe play area nearby,

and our mother could watch from her window as the boys went down the street.

David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

When they walked out the front door immediately a man on the street stopped and said,

“Let me take your picture.”

David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary and not take candy from strangers,

so they shrank back, uncomfortable,

and leaned into each other in the corner of the doorway on the stoop

as he snapped away.

Some months later,
a poster was put up in churches and temples across the city.
The poster featured two children in play clothes, with huge eyes and frightened looks,
huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.
Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they saw the poster,
and recognized their own children!

The poster read: ***These Children
Need Your Help!
Please Give!***

These days Jon laughs when he recalls
that morning on the stoop and subsequent poster,
and he says, *"Hey, it's still true. Send money! I can put it to good use!"*

Jesus wants to know what your response will be
to our common humanity and common needs.
The modern Word of God proclaims,
"Hey, it's still true. Send money! Christ can put it to good use!"

Where scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

EXTRA MATERIAL

Surely the Lord provides the gift of empathy and compassion.
Is there anyone here whose plight we should ignore?
We are called to care for others,
whether family, neighbors, or sojourners in our midst.
Why do people respond to these misfortunes and not to others?
The key to engaging empathy is what has been called "the identifiable victim effect."
As the economist Thomas Schelling mordantly observed,
*"Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair
need thousands of dollars for an operation
that will prolong her life until Christmas,
and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her.
But let it be reported that without a sales tax
the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate
and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths—
not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks."*
Why is it that we care immensely for the starving child gnawing on a crust of bread
in the photo who has a distended belly and flies on her face,
and so we will send \$35 a month to sponsor her and her orphan mates,

yet we turn a deaf ear and a cold shoulder
to the plight of thousands of children who are having their last supper
because state & federal funding has been cut or directed elsewhere
from breakfast programs and Head Starts and health insurance?
The Gospel calls to us to have empathy and compassion for those hurting in our midst.
Every social program, every fiscal policy,
every church and temple and mosque ministry
needs to be held up next to the measuring stick
of whether it hurts or helps, harms or heals
the widows, the children, and the Elijahs in our midst.
Whom does society say it is okay to ignore?
Whom is God commanding you to care for, to minister unto, to welcome into your presence?
There are no nameless or faceless children of God.
Their plight and pleas move the heart of God,
and the Lord commands us to provide,
and to live into the trust that one day the recipient will become the donor.

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Endnotes:

- (1) The Baby in the Well: The case against empathy. by Paul Bloom, The New Yorker Magazine, May 20, 2013
- (2) Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A, page 519.

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The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert
(*he, him, his*)
Senior Pastor
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
601 West Ponce De Leon Avenue
Decatur, Georgia 30030
404-378-3621