

1 Kings 17:1-16

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, '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.' The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' 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.' As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' 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.' Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.' She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Luke 4:16-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Our Hebrew Scripture story needs a little introduction and context in order to grasp the full story. King Ahab is generally considered the worst Hebrew king ever. He is who Herman Melville's whaling captain was named for. Ahab married Queen Jezebel of Sidon, and she brought worship of her people's idol Ba'al to Israel. They built a temple of Ba'al in the capital city. They looked to completely replace worship of God with worship of Ba'al.

Ba'al was an idol of fertility. Fertility not just of people and animals, but of the land. The people of Sidon worshipped Ba'al because they hoped for good harvests. So, when God said that there would be no rain until God said so, that was a deliberate and dramatic slap in the face to anyone worshipping Ba'al. After delivering that message, Elijah had to run away.

God has Elijah run away to the last place King Ahab and Queen Jezebel would look for him – the town of Zarephath, in her homeland of Sidon. When he gets there, he claims the rights of hospitality, but the widow he asks has nothing. She is literally preparing to cook up the last food that she and her son have, to eat it and then, she expects, starve to death.

But Elijah tells her that she won't run out of meal or oil until rain comes and the famine ends. And she doesn't. The drought lasts for over three years,¹ but she doesn't run out of meal or oil for that whole time.

Later in the drought, her son dies, and Elijah raises him from the dead.² God gives Elijah power to take care of this woman and her son, and they take care of him as well.

God cares.

God cares about these people in Sidon, historical enemies of the Hebrew people.

This is why people get angry with Jesus. Jesus points out that there were many widows and poor people in Israel in Elijah's time, but Elijah wasn't sent to any of them. Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon.

¹ 1 Kings 18:1, Luke 4:25.

² 1 Kings 18.

Likewise, there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elijah's protégé Elisha, but the only leper we know that he cleansed was Naaman, a Syrian general who kept Hebrew slaves.³

The people of Nazareth are angry with Jesus because he says that God cares about people who are not Jewish. The people of Nazareth, people who have known Jesus since he was a child, want to kill him, just for saying that.

Jesus does not say that God doesn't care about Jews. In fact, Jesus was sent first to the Jews, and the word about Jesus saving the world only made its way to us Gentiles later.⁴ God caring is not an *either/or*. It's a *both/and*.

You've heard me say this before, but I'm going to say it again, quoting the late Rachel Held Evans. "The good news is you are a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don't get to choose your siblings."⁵

God cared about the poor when God commanded that God's people literally leave some of their crops in the field for them, and when Jesus said that his mission was to bring good news to the poor, news of release from

³ Luke 4:27, 2 Kings 5.

⁴ Acts 13:46.

⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*.

oppression and the year of God's favor.⁶ This was not new with Jesus: he was reading from the prophet Isaiah.

God cared about refugees when Ruth was an economic refugee in Bethlehem, and God cared about refugees when Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus were refugees in Egypt, fleeing political violence.⁷ God cares about refugees today, whether they are crossing the Mediterranean or the Rio Grande.

God cared about human dignity when God told God's people that they have to pay laborers promptly, and that they have to treat foreigners as well as they treat their own people.⁸ God cares about human dignity today. For all humans.

All of those human beings out there, whether we feel they are like us or not, are our siblings.

Whether they look like us, or not.

Whether they talk like us, or not.

Whether they structure their families the way we do, or not.

⁶ Leviticus 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:17-21, and Luke 4:18-19, respectively. Jesus was reading from Isaiah, chapter 61.

⁷ The book of Ruth, and Matthew 2:13-15, respectively.

⁸ Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15, and Leviticus 19:33-34 and Numbers 15:15, respectively.

They are human beings, created in the image of the Almighty God.

God loves them.

And God calls us to love them, too.

Even if they don't love us back. Jesus told us to love even our enemies.⁹

If you've been around my family much you've heard this exchange:

"I love you."

"I can tell."

If we say that we love people, whether we're saying it to their face or in general, they ought to be able to tell. By what we say and by what we do.

This next week, when faced with whatever happens in our lives and in our country, we all need to remember how Jesus treated people. He fed the hungry. He restored outcasts to community. He loved his neighbors. He fed even Judas at his table.

And Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you."¹⁰

Amen.

⁹ Matthew 5:43-48.

¹⁰ John 20:21.