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1st King 17:22, NRSV.

²² The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.

Oil, Flour and a Dead Son: A Metaphor.

As a kid, I was always hustling to earn money. When I was eleven to fourteen, I picked citrus with migrant workers. I did odd jobs around my parents' neighborhood, mowing lawns, taking care of people's houses, pets, and yards when they were on vacation, and planting gardens. I washed cars and changed oil on cars. When I was fourteen, we moved from Oxnard, in Ventura County, where we lived not that far from the beach, south and deeply inland to the edge of the Mojave Desert. I continued doing whatever I could for money, but I was suddenly in a very different climate, and once, things did not go well. I got a job installing a sprinkler system in someone's backyard. It was my first summer in the desert. It was extraordinarily hot, and I was not at all acclimated. I showed up at the home of a young couple on a Monday morning. The husband was at work. I started out by digging the trenches that I would need to lay down the PVC pipes. Since it cost money to rent the trencher, I decided to do all the trenches the first day. As soon

as I stepped into their backyard and started pushing the trencher, I felt the heat – big time. Sweat poured off me. I tried taking frequent breaks and retreating into the shade of their back deck, but it was only slightly cooler there. I kept trying to push through, but by midmorning, I was not in good shape. The yard was entirely dirt, and between the heat and the dust, I started having trouble breathing. I had asthma, but nowhere near as bad as my brother’s asthma, so I didn’t worry about it. Then, suddenly, the slight stuffiness in my lungs turned to a thick cottony feeling. I couldn’t breathe. I went to the ground, and under the intense sun, I laid on my back fighting for air. It was at this moment that the woman who owned the house, who had apparently been watching me through the sliding glass door that led to the backyard, came running outside. She came up to me, dropped down to her knees, and said something like, “What have I done?”

1st and 2nd Kings are a single book in the original Hebrew Scriptures. Kings was written around 550 B.C., during the Babylonian exile, and the two volumes focus on the stories of the Israelite Kings, beginning with King David. The first eleven chapters of 1 Kings are largely devoted to Solomon’s reign; he was the son of David. I want to look at a passage from later in 1 Kings, Chapter 17, after the death of Solomon, when Ahab is king. I’d like to consider one specific tale of Elijah and look at it more deeply than people typically do. There is a major

drought and the crops have failed. People are hungry. Elijah is a prophet, serving in the 9th century B.C. He is considered the most romantic of all the prophets, perhaps of all biblical characters, in that he embodies the essence of a daring, emotional, and lone hero constantly battling against terrible odds. He was very influential in his time, in that he led the fight against the inroads that the Canaanite god Baal had made into Israelite society. His focus was on having an unconditional trust in and loyalty to the true God, Yahweh, which in Hebrew derives from a phrase meaning *“He who brings into existence whatever exists”*. In the end, Elijah never dies. He ascends into Heaven, making his biblical image eternally dramatic. In life, he dresses oddly, and later, John the Baptist would seemingly deliberately echo the way Elijah dressed in what was called haircloth, a stiff fabric often woven from horsehair. Elijah is a rugged man who lives for a while in a cave. He spends his life fighting the multi-god tendencies that seep from paganism into the faith of the Israelites. As a God-sent punishment against King Ahab for building a temple to the pagan God Baal, Elijah predicts a drought that strikes Israel. This puts Elijah at risk, and to protect him, God sends Elijah out of Ahab’s territory and into Phoenician territory. This is where our story today begins.

The following is a bit long, and I apologize. I have tried to edit it down. But this should be easy to follow. Here is 17:7-24 of 1 Kings from the NRSV:

⁷ But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹ "Go now to Zarephath, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰ 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." ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." ²² The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ Elijah took the child, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." ²⁴ So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

The area to where God sends Elijah to escape the angry king is also in a drought. There is a poor widow there. Elijah asks her to bring him water and bread. This is a big deal during a drought in the desert, among people who

survive by subsistence farming. The widow explains that she has nothing baked, and in fact, only has a handful of flour and a bit of oil. She says: *"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."* Apparently, she has already given up on survival, believing that this will be their last meal and she and her son will starve to death. Elijah tests her faith by telling her to give the last of her food to him: *"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."* This last part about her then making food for her and her son after she uses up her supplies implies that a miracle will happen. Elijah says, *"¹⁴ 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."* He's saying that God will protect her and her son by giving them food until the drought is over. Elijah then stays with them for some time.

This is where the story takes a turn, and true power of God's protection of the faithful comes through. The woman has been concerned solely with getting food for their next meal. But now, the woman's son dies of an illness. She cries out to Elijah: *"What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!"* This is a bit difficult to follow. She apparently thinks that with Elijah in her house, God has

been paying extra attention to her, and that as a result, God has detected some hidden, deep sin of hers. She clearly feels guilty about something in her past and is projecting this guilt onto the death of her son. This isn't as bizarre as it would seem to us today. In the ancient world, in Israelite society and in cultures around them, people often thought that a serious illness in one's self or in a loved one was a punishment for sin. Here is what then happens. Elijah *"stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again."* ²² *The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.*

While this woman was understandably perseverating on the concern that her son would starve to death, the real but hidden threat was that he was going to come down with some sort of deadly illness. We know today that he was likely to already have been sick with this disease when his mother chose to feed Elijah and was rewarded with an endless supply of meal and oil. But God is looking ahead. God doesn't just protect in the short term, even if that is all we're asking for. He has much greater vision than we do. We presume that Elijah knows this as well, that what this woman really needs is a medical cure for her son. So, God saves her son, not just from hunger, but from some sort of long term, deadly disease. Like all prophets, Elijah is a spokesman for God. By obeying Elijah, she is

trusting God. She gives Elijah the last of her meal and oil, not knowing the real gift that she is about to receive from God for her faith.

Back to the saga of me and the sprinkler installation job in the Mojave Desert sun. The panicked young woman asked me if she should call an ambulance. (There was no 911 back then; you called the operator and asked for an ambulance.) I remember how horrified she was. I shook my head no and managed to say that it wasn't as bad as it looked, that I would be fine in a couple of minutes. I had a modest variety of asthma that could be triggered by heat and dust. She held my hand for a bit while the asthma attack subsided. Then she helped me into the house, where she sat me down. She asked if she should call my mother. I said no, please, don't call my mom, she'll never let me do any kind of job again unless it's indoors. I said I would be fine, and as soon as I rested for a maybe five minutes, I could get back to work. "You really want the work, don't you?" she said. I said yes - that I was saving up for a car. Then she said that I didn't have to worry about the money: she would pay me anyway. She proceeded to tell me that she had told her husband that morning before he left for work that she wasn't sure it was proper to have some poor teenaged kid working in the heat of the summer desert, that they would be taking advantage of me. I was, after all, a hell of a lot cheaper than a for-real professional sprinkler

system installer, and this seemed wrong. It was indeed a bad thing to do, she told me, and she felt terribly guilty. Her husband, she said, had had told her that I was young and healthy, and that I would be just fine, and this way, they would save a lot of money. “Money,” she said to me, “my husband and I just about got you killed so that we could save a little money.” She proceeded to apologize to me. Then she asked me if I would like some iced tea.

I proceeded to spend the next half hour or so in an air-conditioned house, drinking iced tea. It was only then that I noticed that there was a large cross on the kitchen wall. She told me that they were Protestants. I was Catholic, and despite them not being the proper kind of Christian, I realized that she believed deeply in God. I also realized that I could get paid for the entire day without doing any more work. But the job was supposed to last two weeks and I didn’t want to lose all that pay, so I told her that I would go back out and continue trenching. She said no - absolutely not. No. She was not going to kill some hundred-pound boy so that her husband could save a few bucks for a new set of golf clubs. She then announced that she was going to pay me for the entire two weeks – and her husband could put the damn sprinkler system in himself. So, a couple of hours later, when her husband dashed home for lunch to see how the sprinkler system kid was doing, he was surprised to see that I had only managed

to dig a few yards of trench. I was sitting in his kitchen eating the lunch his wife had made for me and drinking more iced tea. She took him into the next room, and I could hear her whispering to him, explaining what had happened. Then he yelled out: “What the hell? Pay him to do nothing! For two weeks!”

Buddhists and Hindus have a notion called Karma. The idea is that your actions right now will determine your destiny in this life and how joyful or nasty your next life will be. Christians do not believe in Karma. You might suspect that the woman who hired me was concerned about her Karma, worried that bad things would be sure to happen to her if she were to kill off some undersized kid to save a few bucks. But that’s not the case. In truth, she was a lot like the woman with the tiny amount of meal and oil, the woman who trusted God and knew that it was simply always the best idea to do what God wants. It was the husband who came back into the kitchen to talk to me. I was worried that he might start giving me a hard time, accusing me of conning them out of a couple of weeks’ pay by acting like an invalid. But he looked very thoughtful as he said to me something like this: “We had a little girl. She passed away as an infant. It was hard for my wife to get pregnant the first time. Since our baby died, it’s been very important to her that she stay positive, that she doesn’t become bitter. That’s why it’s so important to her that we treat you well. Now, we’ve got another child

on the way. We were just trying to stay happy, to continue to believe in God. We didn't think we would have another child. My wife knows it's because she has stayed thankful, kept her trust in God, and continued to act the way God wants."

This was all beyond my comprehension when I was fourteen. But I realized later that after something terrible happened to these people, they kept trusting God and knew that God would take care of them. They let God decide what that would mean. They knew God had vision far more powerful than theirs.

Here's how the sprinkler system got built. I worked in the late afternoon and early evenings, and the husband joined me each day when he got home from work. The sprinkler system ended up better than it would have if I had built it on my own. I was saturated with snacks and drinks, with the woman insisting that I take very frequent breaks. The first couple of days, she came out every few minutes to make sure that I was still on my feet. I did not have any more asthma attacks, and with flood lights turned on in the backyard, I learned a lesson that I would use many more times, as I worked in the desert: if possible, work at night.

The woman who wanted food for her and her son but received something greater can be seen as a metaphor for God taking care of us more than just physically. If we truly trust God, God will go beyond simply fixing some concrete earthly problem: God will keep us healthy spiritually - and do so for eternity.