

Make a Small Loaf

1 Kings 17:8-16

October 23, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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How are you doing? How are you feeling about the world these days?

Do you wake up in the morning, grateful to be in New Hampshire in the autumn? It is my favorite season here by far. Do you feel grateful to live in this place where you grew up, or where you vacationed for so many years? Are you snug and content in your warm home as the days grow cooler? Are you confident that you will have enough of everything you need in the future? Are you feeling the abundance that is in your life right now?

Or are you feeling anxious, maybe a little depressed? Do rising prices for gasoline and eggs make you feel unsafe? Do the midterm elections scare you? Do you want to throw a rock at your television? Are you dreading the day when you simply won't have enough? When you yourself won't BE enough to meet the moment? Is your life colored, not by abundance, but by a sense of scarcity right now?

Maybe you are feeling all of these things. I know that I am aware of both scarcity and abundance in my own life almost every day. And here we are, on Stewardship Sunday, the day we make promises to God and to one another about our gifts of time and treasure to support God's work in the coming year, feeling both the abundance in our lives and anxiety about scarcity in the future. It takes a lot to stand in the tension of that moment and make a leap of faith. Today's Bible story is written precisely for us today.

After King Solomon dies, the United Kingdom of Israel that he has ruled over splits into two kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Today's story is set in the northern kingdom, about 850 years before Jesus was born. King Ahab rules, and he has married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, to the north. Jezebel is a worshiper of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility. Ba'al's worshipers believe that Ba'al brings the rain, and therefore brings life. Israel's King Ahab has erected altars to Ba'al within Israel itself. The Bible makes it very clear that God is not pleased about this. So, God sends the Prophet Elijah to show King Ahab that it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who governs the rain, not Ba'al, and so there will be no rain at all until God says so.

King Ahab is not best pleased with this announcement, so God sends Elijah out into a ravine east of the Jordan River to wait in safety for a while. This time of waiting is also a time of preparation and learning for Elijah. He has to unlearn some old ways and open himself to God's providence in his life in ways he cannot possibly expect.

Elijah camps in the ravine and drinks water from the little creek there. But the land is barren and there is no food. So, Elijah is fed by ravens, who bring meat and bread twice a day. To a person of the Jewish faith, ravens are unclean animals. Yet God uses them to feed Elijah, day and night. What does it take, I wonder, for Elijah to accept a handout from a raven? Does he feel nourished by the gift of bread and meat from these birds? Or does he feel defiled by it? How long does Elijah have to sit with his vulnerability, his hunger, his need, before he lets go of the sense of superiority that makes these creatures seem unacceptable to him? How long before he recognizes one raven from another? How long before he sees them as creatures of God, like himself? What does Elijah have to let go of, in order to experience the abundance that God is sending to him twice a day, every day, when the rest of the land is beginning to live in the scarcity of drought and famine? How long before Elijah simply accepts the gifts of God and honors these messengers who bring them?

Eventually, because there is no rain, the little creek dries up, so God sends Elijah to learn another lesson about scarcity and abundance. God sends him to Zarephath, a port city in the region of Sidon. Recall that Sidon is where Queen Jezebel comes from. Zarephath is not in Israel. It is an area where Ba'al is worshiped by all the people. And God tells Elijah to go there, to be fed again, this time by a widow.

I think you know that in the ancient Near East, widows were powerless people, and almost always impoverished. This is who Elijah must learn to depend upon? A Ba'al-worshipping widow? This is where God's abundance lies? It is a long walk from the ravine to Zarephath. I wonder what kinds of arguments Elijah has with God along the way. "I finally got the raven thing, God, but really? A widow? Widows can barely feed themselves? This is who is supposed to feed me? And Zarephath? Really?"

Finally, Elijah arrives at the gate of Zarephath, exhausted, filthy, probably not smelling too good after days and days on the road. And sure enough, right there at the gate of the city, there is a widow, gathering sticks. Elijah calls out to her, "Bring me a little water, so that I may have a drink, and – by the way – bring me a morsel of bread, too." She must think he is crazy. She must want to ask, "Do you have any idea who I am, you stinky foreigner? Do you know what my life is like?" But what she says to Elijah is, "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 gathering a couple of sticks now so that I may go home and prepare one last meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and then we will die."

Elijah responds, "Do not be afraid. Go and do as you have said, but first, make a small loaf of bread for me, and then feed yourself and your son what remains. 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.”

I suppose she has nothing left to lose. So, the widow does as Elijah says. And sure enough, the jar of meal is replenished. The jug of oil is full once more. Elijah stays in her household for many days and no one starves. In the midst of growing scarcity in the land, this poor widow and her son, this worshiper of Ba'al, this woman of no resources, and this wandering, unbathed, worshiper of the God of Israel have found God's abundance by depending on one another. How long, I wonder, does it take Elijah to recognize her as his equal in this relationship? How long does it take him to understand that they each will starve if they are apart, yet together they will thrive? How long before he speaks of "us" rather than "them"?

As we think about the future for ourselves and for this church, I suspect that we need to learn some of the same lessons that Elijah learned. Our future is not our own. It is tied up with people around us who are not like us at all. The Bible teaches us that scarcity comes from going our own way, always with people who are just like us. God's abundance comes when we find our way to work as equals with people who are very different from us. It takes humility to receive food from a raven, or from a Ba'al-worshiping foreign woman. I love that this church reaches out to those who are in need, and I don't think we should ever stop doing that. But that is not the only way – or even the best way – to interact with our neighbors. It takes humility for us to ask for help from someone we don't know. It takes humility to meet others as partners, even in our shared need, rather than with us always offering a helping hand and the other person always being on the receiving end. These are growing edges for our church, and uncomfortable ones for us, as they surely were for Elijah.

But we are learning about women in the Hebrew Scriptures this fall, so I also want us to think for a moment about what we have to learn from the widow herself. She is a powerless person in her world. In the best of times, she lives on the edge. But these are not the best of times. These are hard times in her part of the world, what with no rain for months, and she and her son are about to fall right over the edge. Yet even in these dire circumstances, the message she receives from God is this: Make a small loaf. Use it to feed a hungry person. There will be enough for you now and enough later, too. Use what you have today to make just a small loaf. It will be enough.

So, here we are on this Stewardship Sunday. We have been talking for months about the need to close our budget gap, to set a sustainable path for the future of this church. The ad hoc committee asked us to set as a goal a 5% increase in total pledges for the operating budget for

the coming year. Did that goal make you anxious? We are all really aware of this need, and we all want this church that we love to continue to thrive here.

But we also live in the real world, where jobs are always tenuous, where the stock market is down a lot, where Social Security checks will be rising, but grocery prices seem to be rising more. And so, we take this leap of faith together. We make a pledge of what we think we can give in the coming year. We pray that God will help us to honor that commitment. We don't know if it will be enough. And if we have pledged to give more next year, there is still the nagging worry that WE may not have enough for ourselves. We are like the widow who had only a small measure of meal and a little oil. The need is great, and our resources are always limited.

God's message to us is the same as it was to the widow: Make the loaf you can make today. If this is a time of abundance in your life, make a big loaf. Make a lot of loaves, and give them with joy. If this is a time of scarcity in your life, take the little bit of meal in your jar and the little bit of oil in your jug and make a tiny loaf, and give it with joy. If you have enough right now, but you are anxious for the future, give your anxiety to God. Then make the loaf you can make today, and trust God to replenish your meal and your oil and to restore your spirit tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, so that you, too can give with joy.

Amen