

SERMON
HOPE FOR HARD TIMES
LESSONS ON FAITH FROM ELIJAH AND ELISHA
“Keep Pouring”
2 Kings 4:1-7 (MSG)
Sunday, October 25, 2020

A very nervous airline passenger began pacing the terminal when bad weather delayed his flight. During his walk he ran across one of those insurance machines.

It offered \$100,000 in the event of an untimely death aboard his flight. The policy was just \$3. He looked out the window at the threatening clouds and thought of his family at home. For that price it was foolish NOT to buy, so he took out the coverage.

He then looked for a place to eat. He settled on his favorite – Chinese food. It was a very relaxing and calming meal until he opened his fortune cookie. It read, “Your recent investment will pay big dividends!”

In our Bible passage for this morning we encounter yet another widow; but instead of being a foreigner like the widow at Zarephath; she’s a widow from among the company of prophets. She’s one of their own; yet like the widow at Zarephath, she finds herself living in a state of hopelessness. The only thing she has left to her name is a little jar of oil: not enough to even begin paying off her debt. DeVega, in his book *Hope for Hard Times* says of the widow: *“She had been married to a colleague of Elisha...And when her husband died, she was left with a heap of trouble. Not only was she left with little opportunity for income, for which she had depended on her husband, she was also left with an incredible amount of debt due to money he had borrowed. We’re not told where that debt came from; we are only told that it was too large for this woman to take care of on her own. And, perhaps, worst of all, the creditors came knocking. Because she didn’t have the money, the woman faced the possibility that her children would be sold into slavery in order to pay off the debt.”*

I have a sense of how hopeless this woman must have felt. My wife and I at one time in our marriage were up to ears in debt. I remember the phone calls we received from the debt collectors... threatening to seize our car ..., our furniture... our fortunes... even our home. Seeing that we lived in a parsonage I told them they couldn’t seize our house. They laughed with that wicked evil villain laugh. “We won’t have to seize your parsonage,” they said, “we will ensure that you will lose your job with the church once we tell them how delinquent you are on your debts.” They had so frightened, humiliated, and dehumanized me that I found myself clinging to nothing more than the mere threads of an unraveling rope. I lived knowing that at any moment those threads would snap sending my wife and I to our doom. If you have ever seen a mouse being swallowed whole by a snake then you know how I felt with those debt collectors.

This widow was no different. She, not only was grieving the loss of her husband and saddled with a debt she could not pay; she was scared to death that she might lose her children.

What she needed more than anything was for someone or something to intervene on her behalf... to become a ray of hope in the darkest moments of her life.

DeVega says that our focus of this story should not be upon the widow’s plight but upon that which we can learn from the widow’s story about our own struggles with hopelessness. What can we glean that will help us better navigate through the most challenging of times? And how can we better prepare ourselves for when God shows up with a miracle?

When it comes to looking for a miracle many of us, says DeVega, *“assume that the only kind of miracle we should expect is if God were to do something like rain down money from the sky. Or if all the creditors, for some unforeseen reason, decided to forgive the debt. Or if somehow we won the Powerball lottery.”*

But for the widow in our scripture passage none of these happened... did they?

The challenge with miracles is that they seldom happen the way we imagined them.

I am reminded of the man looking for a miracle who once whispered:

“‘God, speak to me.’

And a meadowlark sang.

*But the man did not hear.
 So the man yelled, 'God, speak to me!'
 Thunder rolled across the sky.
 But the man did not listen.
 The man looked around and said, 'God, let me see you.'
 A star shone brightly.
 But he noticed it not.
 And the man shouted, 'God, show me a miracle.'
 And a life was born.
 But the man was unaware.
 So, the man cried out in despair, 'Touch me, God, and let me know that you are here!'
 Whereupon God reached down and touched the man.
 But the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.'*

DeVega says that our task as Christ-followers is to be always opened to how God can and might operate within our lives. We do this best when we are willing to let go of our limiting views of God and allow God to be God. Through Elisha's instruction the widow was able to do just this.

The first thing I observe about this miracle; is that it required the widow's faith. DeVega says of the widow's faith: *"Instead of being a passive recipient of God's miracle she became an active participant in it."* She not only had to take an inventory of what she had in her home she had to pour out what little precious oil she did have. Keep pouring, not until you run out of oil; Elisha instructed her, but until you run out of containers.

The widow didn't object. She didn't point out to Elisha the mathematical errors of his instruction. She didn't point out the obvious and say, "You realize that there is only so much oil that can be poured out of one little jar" She didn't argue with him. She didn't contradict him. She didn't even compare her oil with getting blood out of a turnip. **SHE JUST KEPT POURING!**

The second thing I observe about this miracle is the community's faith. Not only was the widow a willing participant; but so too was the community. DeVega says of their faith: *"Each vessel, whether it was large urns, medium-sized pots, or small cups symbolized the care and concern of someone who wanted to do her or his part to help this woman."*

They didn't object. They didn't point out the mathematical errors of Elisha's instruction. They didn't point out the obvious: "But it's only one little cup of oil; what good are my containers going to do?"

AS THE WIDOW KEPT POURING, THE COMMUNITY KEPT GIVING!

And finally, I observe the blessings of this miracle. DeVega says of the blessing; *"Because of the widow's willingness to participate, and because of the community coming to her side, a miracle was done not only to her but through her."* From that little jar of precious oil not only did she pay off all her debts she saved her children's lives as well. *"And think of those to whom she sold that oil to,"* writes DeVega, *"they too also received the blessing that God had miraculously provided through that oil."*

But if the widow hadn't kept pouring and the community hadn't kept giving there would have been no blessing.

I remember the story that was told of a Malawian Christian family who was hungry. Her baby had been crying for food so she prayed with her husband that God would help them. The husband was skeptical, but they prayed together for help. When they had finished praying, nothing had changed.

There were a couple of ears of maize on the table, that was it. So, the mother took her biggest basket to carry the two ears and headed for the mill where she would grind her corn. She was ashamed of how little food she had, so she bypassed her neighborhood mill and walked to a distant village where she was unknown.

The manager at this distant mill questioned the woman when she brought her two ears forward for grinding. He wanted to know why she brought only two ears. She answered that this was all she had. Then he asked her why she carried such a large basket on her head for two little ears of corn. She said she was ashamed.

Another woman was at the mill having her corn ground and she overheard the conversation. She had plenty to feed her family and said to the manager, "Fill her basket full of flour! I have extra."

The miracle here, like that of the miracle of the precious jar of oil, isn't that God just showed up, snapped his fingers, and if by magic produced a basketful of corn. The real miracle is that the mother, even though she didn't know how, trusted that God would provide. But it wasn't just the mother who trusted; it was the other woman at the mill who trusted as well.

KEEP POURING!

KEEP GIVING!

DeVega says, *"Our belief in miracles is a central part of what it means to be a person of faith. It's not because we need to check our brains at the door and not because it is impossible to be both an intellectual person and person of faith. It's because believing in the impossible makes things possible..."*

If we open ourselves up to the idea of oil being inexhaustible, or bread and fish being multiplied for a crowd, or a dead person being raised to life, then maybe we will open ourselves up to some other incredible ideas too."

But as soon as we stop pouring...

As soon as we stop giving...

We limit our ability of seeing God at work.

In a world where there seems to be nothing but darkness and hard times, the real miracle, says DeVega, *"is the belief in the irrational decision to follow the example of Jesus Christ."*

The widow found hope because she kept pouring.

The community found hope because they kept giving.

And together they discovered the blessing of God.

Hope is the willingness to keep pouring.