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Stepping into Mystery
1 Kings 17: 1-24
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After the Middle School Musical *Elijah*, I thought it would be fun for us to focus on the stories of Elijah and Elisha and to see what they have to tell us.

Elijah's story actually begins when Elijah's enemy King Ahab is introduced. We're told that King Ahab did "evil in the sight of God more than all who were before him." This is quite an accomplishment for Ahab. The Kings in 1st Kings have an approval rating a lot like the U.S. Congress. And Ahab finds a way to dip a bit lower.

So what did Ahab do that was so bad? Did he use performance enhancing drugs or send the IRS after his opponents? No, Ahab's problem was he committed idolatry, the most popular sin in the Bible. Talk about idolatry is often confusing because it's wrapped the message of God's jealousy. We wonder why God's so insecure all the time.

But idolatry matters, it mattered then and it matters now. Idolatry is essentially misplaced devotion. Idolatry is giving our allegiance, our worship to someone or something that doesn't deserve it. We all send our devotion and allegiance to various places, some more deserving than others. The concern in the Hebrew Scriptures was that if you started worshipping gods other than Yahweh, you would turn into the Empire of Egypt, an empire more focused on its army and expanding it's power and reach, than on serving its people. The whole point of God rescuing the Hebrew slaves from Egypt is to give the people of Israel a new way of life and to show Israel and the world how not to be Egypt anymore. What

you do is you follow the Ten Commandments and you stay devoted to God, and you will do justice to one another and you won't turn into an empire that harms and enslaves people. That's what at stake.

Ambition takes a hold of Ahab, he doesn't focus on the people, he wants to make a name for himself and for Israel, and so he starts making political alliances. The way you do that is you marry princesses from other countries. He marries Jezebel, princess of the Sidonians, and Jezebel brings her gods with her into the marriage. Ahab is head over heels in love, he will do anything for Jezebel, and so he builds monuments and altars for Baal and the other gods of Jezebel. God needs someone to go have a talk with Ahab, and our story with Elijah begins.

Elijah goes to Ahab and says, "Because of your idolatry, there's going to be a drought." Interestingly, not only does idolatry, misplaced devotion, place you on the slippery slope to Egypt and the sins of empire, misplaced devotion also causes harm to the land on which you depend.

God then speaks to Elijah and says, "Elijah, now that you have spoken to Ahab, it's time to run." "Turn east and hide in the Wadi Cherith (a Wadi is a streambed that often flows seasonally). You shall drink from the Wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

The Ravens start to feed Elijah, and they sing, of course, "God will provide strength for the journey, bread for the morning and shelter for the night...God will provide hope for the weary, God will sustain me, all the days of my life."

God provides for Elijah, which is great, life is good. But then the Wadi, the river, dries up, and now the question becomes, "Is God still able to provide for Elijah, and will Elijah trust?" This is our question too. When life dries up we wonder if God can provide what we need, and it becomes very difficult to trust.

Elijah keeps going, and God has an idea. God says, "Elijah, I want you go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, I've commanded a widow to feed you there." This is a ridiculous idea. Sidon is foreign territory. Why would a prophet of Yahweh be welcomed there? And a widow in Sidon isn't going to have any resources to care for Elijah. Elijah has every reason not to trust in God's leading here. But Elijah goes to Zarephath.

Elijah arrives at the gate of the town. He sees a widow gathering sticks, and he calls out to her and asks if she can get him a little water. As she's going he says, "While you're at it, would you bring me a little bread, just a morsel." Maybe the widow is a little irritated at being bossed around, or she just can't hold it in anymore. She says, "As your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. Now I'm gathering sticks to prepare it so that my son and I may eat it and die."

We might expect Elijah to apologize and to gracefully back away, "I'm sorry to trouble you, never mind," and then to look for a widow with a few more resources. But Elijah says, "Nope, this is the one." Elijah says, "Do not be afraid," like he wasn't even paying attention. And then he says this: "Go and do what you have said, but first, make me a cake and bring it to me. Nothing fancy, just a small cake, no frosting. And then afterwards make some food for yourself and your son. For thus says the God of Israel, the jar of meal and the jar of oil will not empty until God sends rain on the earth. God will provide for all three of us together, God says. "

This poor widow. Elijah could have done this the other way around. He could have said go make some bread for yourself and your son and I'll throw a little miracle juice in there and you'll find that there's plenty left for me and you can bring me the leftovers. But he didn't. Now the widow has to choose, she has to decide whether she trusts in God to provide or not. Do I give to the stranger and then trust that I will still have what I need. And she does trust. And she is given what she needs. And the jar of meal and oil don't run out until the rains come. God provides miraculously, and the widow from the foreign land proves faithful when the powerful king does not.

I regularly say that what's proclaimed in miracle stories isn't, "This story happened." Instead, miracle stories tell us what happens in our life with God. God provides what we need even when life dries up. Even then, God can find a way to give us what we need.

We have now officially moved into spiritual territory, more-than-rational, territory. We have now stepped into mystery. And this may be hard place for us to be. It's one thing to marvel at the mystery of the universe, it's another to experience the power at the heart of the universe pulling on the puzzle pieces of our life and fitting them into place, for just a little while, just until the rains come to wash away the dry

time in our life. We can't quantify this, it's hard to talk about this, but we experience God doing this in our lives.

I don't often do this, but just this week, I was in the midst of some particularly chaotic moments, more turbulent seas than I normally sail though. So I stopped and took a few deep breaths, centered myself, and then I prayed the prayer of Anne Lamott, "Help me, please," "Help this situation work out in the best way it can." And for the next few hours, everything came together. So much so that I thought, "Hmm, I think that was God moving." In three hours life was a frayed mess again, but nothing was at stake, it didn't matter. But in those moments I experienced God providing what I needed. Can I prove that God was moving puzzle pieces around? No. Did I experience God moving in my life? Yes.

Last weekend I was at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Conference of the UCC, and Pastor Abby and I had a chance to sit down and talk with our Associate Conference minister Elena Larssen. Elena wanted to talk about our church because she's been called to be the Senior Minister of the UCC church in Long Beach, a church that's a lot like this one, a church that will also have the privilege of being served by two, (ahem) youngish pastors, and she wanted to chat about this. Her husband Mark joined in on the conversation too, he's a UCC pastor as well. But when we sat down, first they had to tell their story, of what God had done. It was like they just had to get it out.

Last summer, they were married. Two Californians who found true love in Minnesota, of course. After walking through some crisis together, going through a dry time in their life, they realized that they longed to be close to their families in California, it felt like God was leading them to California. A clergy couple looking for work today is like married academics looking for work. It's almost impossible. And California is known for many things, but it isn't known for having UCC churches on every corner. Anyway, they threw their names in the hat for a few churches they were excited about, and after a few rounds of interviews, a church in Manhattan Beach California, called Mark out for a face-to-face interview for their Senior Pastor position. It's getting serious now. Elena is preparing to be without a job, she calls the Conference office to see if there's anything she can do, interim work, pulpit supply, etc. While they are both in Manhattan Beach for Mark's interview, a UCC church in Long Beach, 15 minutes

down the road from Manhattan Beach, calls Elena to see if she will do a face to face interview for the Senior Pastor position at Long Beach UCC. “You’ll never guess where I am, she says.”

After the interview, Mark is offered the position. After Elena’s interview, Elena is offered the position. They schedule their candidating Sundays for the same day, the Manhattan Beach congregation unanimously calls Mark and then ten minutes later the Long Beach congregation unanimously calls Elena. And because of those fancy text messages Mark and Elena let the congregations know what has happened, and everyone celebrates. At Elena’s church she said people were looking at each other with raised eyebrows and were giggling nervously. Finally, a woman came up to Elena and said, “You know, we’re UCC, we don’t believe in miracles around here, so we don’t quite know what to do with what’s just happened.” And Elena smiled. I said, “It sounds like the Spirit’s been doing some heavy lifting in your lives.” And Elena said, “Heavy lifting. I like the sound of that.”

Through today’s story of Elijah, our ancestors of faith proclaim God provides. God provides what we need, even in the dry and brittle times. God finds ways to provide until the rains come and soak the ground. We’re to pay attention to our own experiences, and to trust that this is what God does. May it be so. Amen.