“Picking Up Sticks at the City Gate”

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1 Kings 17:8-16

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” That’s one of the most famous openings of a book ever written: *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens. London and Paris, at the time of the French Revolution. Where it was the best of times, Dickens tells us, and it was the worst of times; “…it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” The best time ever. The worst time ever. Although in that moment, no one knew it. Dickens wrote his *Tale of Two Cities* one hundred years after those events, as historical fiction, which means, it has truth, but it isn’t factual. It’s one writer’s telling of what life was like, back then—that if we’d been alive, this story might have been ours, depending on which side of the city or the river or the channel we lived. There is always so much life, so many stories, happening alongside one another in any given place. And so many ways to tell them. “It was the best of times. It was worst of times.” Good writers tell the truth about that.

So do good prophets. And of all the Hebrew prophets, Elijah is remembered as the beloved one you could count on to say, “Right now, y’all?—it is not the best of times; it is the worst of times, but it could be different, so I’m going to tell you this tale of new possibilities.” It’s why there’s always a place set for Elijah at every Passover seder: an empty chair, and a full glass of wine, in case today is the day he decides to show up and speak to us about our time. Elijah is the prophet of justice, the one Jesus most resembles. He performs miracles and raises the dead, calls out kings and calls down fire, tells the truth and makes good trouble and doesn’t even *die* like a normal person but gets taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and chariot. The man is bigger than life; he’s got superpowers. You read about his showdown with 450 prophets of Baal—which he accomplished single-handedly, by the way—just him and his sword—and you think, Wow, it’s the Bible meets *The Avengers*. Best folk hero ever.

But all that is ahead of him, at the time our passage today takes place. When Elijah meets the widow of Zarephath at the city gate, he’s only just started down the path God has set for him. The only thing he’s done so far is to announce to the terrible King Ahab that drought and famine are coming to Israel, because the people are worshiping idols and the king is so corrupt and depraved, he doesn’t care. “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand,” Elijah declares, “there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” In other words, it is about to be the worst of times for the people of Israel, and King Ahab, pay attention: there’s a new prophet in town. The king is not so out of it that he can’t perceive the obvious—namely, that Elijah is going to be a royal pain in his backside—and he’s not happy about it, that this man of God is about to ruin his good time. So the Word of the Lord comes to Elijah warning him he’d better hide: the king is not taking it well, that he has a fierce new prophet on his case, and he is out for blood: Elijah’s blood. Elijah is told to flee the country and hide, first at a riverbed east of the Jordan, and then in the town of Zarephath, across the border from Israel in Phoenicia. It’s Elijah’s first test of faith: trusting that God will provide for him while he’s on the run. Even if the survival plan is really weird—which it is.

You would think, for instance, that the easiest plan to make, under the circumstances, would be for God to provide for Elijah by pulling out the old manna-in-the-wilderness act: send the heavenly bread fresh every morning, and tell Elijah he can gather enough for the day and no more. That’s how the Hebrew children learned reliance. That’s how God provided food for them in the wilderness, after their escape from Egypt. It took them forty years to learn the lesson, if they ever did, but manna in the wilderness was a well-established miracle of the Almighty, one of Israel’s favorites. If God’s survival plan for Elijah was going to entail a lot of wilderness time, it would make sense to recycle one of those old mighty acts of God: rain down the manna. But that is not what the Lord has in mind.

You might also think, in this case, that another feasible survival plan would be for God to let Elijah use his superpowers to get his own food: turn stones into bread, for instance. Or strike a rock with his staff to get water, like Moses did. At the very least, Elijah could call down fire from on high, so he could cook over it—learn to make wilderness stew, or a mean pot of chili, as men do. That would be efficient, *and* egalitarian. And since summoning fire was going to be the prophet’s signature move, starting in the very next chapter; Elijah could use this wilderness time to practice burning stuff up. But that’s not what the Lord has in mind, either.

God’s survival plan for Elijah is more personal. It will definitely have some fun special effects—ravens that bring food, a jar of flour that miraculously replenishes itself—but the *tone* of it is more personal. God’s survival plan for Elijah involves breaking down a few barriers. Challenging some old patterns. Interrupting Elijah’s way of being in the world, so the prophet learns to open his mind and rethink his own presuppositions, his biases, his prejudices—and yes, he has some; he’s a product of his time and context, like we all are. Before Elijah can live into his destiny and do what God has sent him to do, he has to unlearn a few things. About foreigners. And women. And the lines we draw to separate us and them, clean and unclean, strong and weak. He’s going to have to wrestle with some serious questions, like these:

1. Does a prophet’s strength really come from fire and brimstone and superhero acts of power? Or does it come from the quiet withholding of power so that someone else who needs it can flourish?
2. Here’s another one: Is flying solo really the only way for a prophet to get the work done? Or does the Word of God require mutual discernment—putting our piece of revelation next to someone else’s piece, and listening together for what it might mean?
3. Here’s a gritty one: If God decides that a prophet needs to get over his squeamishness about scavenger birds by giving the job of food delivery to ravens—unkosher creatures, in Elijah’s day—will the prophet moan and complain about his Wilderness Grub hub options? Or can a man of God bite his tongue and deal with a little dirt on his pancakes, knowing that actually, God loves ravens; they are beautiful creatures. And in the immortal words of Peter, in the book of Acts, what God has made clean, Elijah must not call profane (Acts 10).

As I said, God’s survival plan for Elijah in this chapter is personal. Huge questions that he needs to address, to understand his own story, and what is happening in Israel all around him that *he* has been called to speak into. Why is it the worst of times? Because the powerful in Elijah’s day worship idols of their own making, and the powerless pay dearly for it. The poor and vulnerable—*they’re* the ones who suffer.

The book of Kings in the Bible (we divide it into two books, first and second Kings, but it’s really meant to be read as one) is mostly about what goes on in throne rooms. But now and then it tells a story about ordinary people as if to remind us that addressing human suffering is the real reason to call out injustice. Elijah needs to confront King Ahab because the king’s actions have consequences for the poor in other nations. It’s like what’s happening in our world today, with climate change. Poor nations are looking to rich ones and begging them, us, to take action. God’s survival plan for Elijah is designed to sensitize him to the needs of real people. Otherwise, he runs the risk of turning into a religious fundamentalist, obsessed with purity laws. There are bigger things. Justice comes through struggle, a demand to change and *be* changed. Not so we can call ourselves pure. So the most vulnerable among us can thrive.

In Elijah’s day, “the most vulnerable among us” were widows and orphans, for whom the Bible always makes special provision, and of course it is a widow Elijah is about to meet next. They run into one another at the city gate, at Zarephath. She is not a worshiper of the God of Israel; in fact, her people are among Israel’s worst enemies. Yet God has told Elijah that after he’s learned his lesson from the ravens, a widow in the foreign territory of Zarephath is his next source of food and shelter while his own king in his homeland of Israel is trying to hunt him down and kill him: *that’s* irony; straight up.

Elijah was not raised to expect help from such a woman. Elijah was not raised to expect much from foreigners, period. And this one doesn’t look very up to the task, gathering sticks so she can stoke one last fire to cook a handful of flour into a pathetically small flatbread. It’s all she and her son have left, this handful of flour, and it’s going to be their last supper—or excuse for a supper, anyway. They won’t get more than a mouthful apiece. And here’s Elijah, asking her for water to drink and a loaf of bread to eat, as if there weren’t a drought and a famine in the land; as if she had all the flour in the world to bake him baskets full of loaves; as if this were not the worst of times, and she and her son about to die. “I don’t have anything to give you,” the widow tells Elijah. “I’m just out here picking up sticks. I know your God sent you, but I can’t be the person you were intended to meet. Look at me! How can your God possibly think I could be a safe haven for you?”

Elijah could have retreated at this point. He could have gone back to the Lord and asked for direction: maybe he’d gotten the town wrong, or maybe God had given him the wrong address. Maybe this widow wasn’t the widow he was supposed to meet. Or maybe she was, and maybe they were supposed to muddle this through together. Maybe Elijah’s survival plan was bound up in another person’s survival: a poor woman from another religion who had nothing but a handful of flour. “Okay,” he tells her, “Here’s what we’ll do. First—*don’t be afraid.* Go home and do what you’ve said, but make me a little loaf before you make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: your jar of flour will not be emptied, and your jug of oil will not fail, until the day God sends rain on the earth to end the drought. You will be provided for, and as odd as it seems to both of us, you will be safe haven for me, and I for you.” And she was. And so was he.

So now, dear saints of House of Hope, I’m wondering about you. I’m wondering what’s happened in your life this past year or two, and how you’d talk about that. Days of the best of times and the worst of times, of wisdom and maybe foolishness too, tucked in there in a few places. Days of believing everything and not believing anything, days of light and shadows, hope and despair—I am guessing you’ve lived them all. I’m guessing you’ve met the widow of Zarephath, or been her, in one way or another, as all of us will be, eventually. Maybe you’ve been fed by ravens; I bet that’s a good story. And maybe you’ve met Elijah, some prophet who has called you out or back, or spoken to you at the city gate; some prophet who knew you were down to your last handful of flour; some prophet who showed up out of the blue to fill an empty place at your table and said, “Here’s my piece of the revelation; what piece do you have?”

I wonder what those tales might be. This might be a season to share them, or some historical fiction—it has truth, too. And if we listen hard, maybe we’ll hear a tale of two worlds, and the realm of God breaking its way into this one. Stories of safe haven: how we might be that for one another, no matter which side of the city or the river or the gate we live.

This might be the time. And may the God of ravens and widows and Elijah the prophet bless us, as we go.

Amen

1 Kings 17 NRSV

1Now 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.” 2The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 3“Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” 5So 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. 6The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. 7But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

8Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” 10So 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.” 11As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12But 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.” 13Elijah 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. 14For 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.” 15She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16The 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.