

Abiding Astonishment: The Reality of Abundance

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1 Kings 17:1-16

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Old Testament scholar Bernard Anderson says, "Elijah the Tishbite... suddenly appears like a meteor." (*Understanding the Old Testament: Fourth Edition*, Prentice Hall: Englewood, NJ, 1986, p. 272.) And it's true. Up until this moment in the history of Israel, he has never appeared before. He crashes into the story with a dramatic suddenness that characterizes much of his life with the kings and queens of ancient Israel.

I've always loved this story, because it creates a picture in my mind's eye. My imagination can follow Elijah as he moves from place to place, surprising people wherever he goes, with his sudden pronouncements and astonishing signs and wonders.

He comes into the history of Israel when things could not have been much worse. The political landscape was cluttered with unholy alliances and Israel had been slowly assimilating the worship of local gods alongside its worship of the one God of Israel, Yahweh.

The current king is Ahab. The Bible describes his reign by saying, "Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him." (1Kings 16:30)

Ahab ruled from the new capital of the Northern kingdom, established by his father, the city of Samaria. He was most hated for marrying a foreign woman from the northern region of Sidon - Jezebel.

Jezebel had brought with her the ancient religion of the Phoenicians - the worship of Baal - the Canaanite storm god. This religion was already present in Israel. But Ahab made it official. He built an altar in Samaria. Jezebel brought many prophets from her land and supported them out of the public treasury. And she was aggressive in using them to cut off the prophets of Yahweh.

Bernie Anderson says, that Jezebel took advantage of the easy going tolerance and naive syncretism of the people, and she almost succeeded in wiping out the traditional faith of Israel. The altars to Yahweh were torn down, prophets were killed and the true worshippers were driven underground. (*Ibid.*)

Another thing that added to the picture of Ahab as Israel's worst king was the fact that during his reign, one of his people rebuilt the city of Jericho. Jericho, of course, was the city that Joshua first conquered when entering the land. Joshua had issued a decree that Jericho should never be rebuilt. He left a curse upon the place. But, nevertheless, the city was rebuilt, and the curse was fulfilled just as Joshua predicted - at the cost of the youngest and oldest sons of the builder.

So, this is the political landscape of the time. It is time in which the power brokers, Omri and then his son Ahab and his wife Jezebel, feel as if they have all the control - that they rule with impunity. Walter Bruggeman says:

It is possible for managers of public power - like Omri

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and Ahab - to have their way for a very long time...
but not finally. In the end, all of the cunning and power of
established authority cannot sustain itself in the face of Yahweh
who wills otherwise.... the powers that be may be mightily
impressed with their power, wealth, knowledge and
capacity to control.... Thus Omri may have been a large
figure in the international politics of the day, but he receives
... only six verses, and those condemn him. Similarly,
Ahab must have been a much noted leader in his time, but
here he is only context for the prophets who are the real
makers of history." (*Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary:
1 & 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys: Macon, GA, 2000, p.205.)

And like a meteor, Elijah flashes into this powerful and prosperous kingdom. He comes from the east - from Gilead across the Jordan - into the mountains of the west - to the sparkling new stronghold of Ahab and Jezebel. His name means, "Yah(weh) is my God." And he leans into that name right away speaking a word of challenge to Ahab (but really to Baal) the god of storms, saying, "there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my words." (17:1)

And the landscape begins to change as the drought takes hold and the green hillsides burn away and the rivers dry up in the valleys.

As the drought continues, the power of the king withers away as well. For the king's primary work is to provide for his people, to assure fertility and prosperity for the land. Without the rain, the king is cursed. Without the rain, the king is irrelevant.

With the challenge thrown down, God directs Elijah back east across the Jordan. As quickly as he came - he disappears from Samaria. The political landscape has been exchanged for a peaceful landscape. He is sent alone - all alone - into a river valley - a wadi. And here's where my imagination takes off. Elijah lives completely and utterly at the mercy and the provision of God. The ravens feed him - and feed him quite well - meat and bread twice a day would have been a luxury then. The river provides him water. The man of God is alone with his God, with the birds of the air to feed him and the green valley to protect him and the river to give him water. He need do nothing but wait upon the Lord for everything. What a respite from the challenges of his travels and his work.

Can you imagine being this at rest in God?

I don't know about you - but sometimes it feels like all I can do is imagine this much trust. I like the idea. I love the idea, in fact. But I have to admit that it also makes me feel vulnerable. It seems like a terrible risk. It's hard for me to believe because even as complicated and non-covenantal as the political landscape and realities of Ahab's days - they seem like child's play compared today, don't they? In our time, it's even hard to

tell who really has the power, let alone how it is all brokered - whether through politics, military might or the global economy.

Can there really be such a reality where all is provided, where we are completely and utterly given over to our God? Is there really such a landscape - a green valley somewhere - for all of us - where all is well?

The answer that history gives is "No." At least according to the next part of the story. For the river dries up even for Elijah. The drought is real. Even though the power of Ahab doesn't reach to the east of the Jordan, the power of Yahweh does. Elijah speaks the truth.

So, God sends Elijah on another journey. And this time he goes far to the north - to the region of Sidon - into Jezebel's territory. God sent him to the town of Zarephath, about a mile inland from the coast of the sea in modern Lebanon. The landscape there is normally beautiful and fertile. High mountains protect the valleys and the sea breezes cool the air. There were good houses there and industry as well as agriculture. But even with all of these resources, the city was burning away in the drought as badly as the rest of the surrounding lands.

Instead of the ravens, however, Elijah is told by God to rely upon the help of a nameless woman that he will meet. She is a widow - which means socially, she is vulnerable and unprotected. She has a son - perhaps she is carrying him, wrapped close to her. She is a Canaanite. And she is starving. She's also physically unprotected. She has moved outside the gate of the city, outside the protection of the city walls, to find some few sticks to build a fire. And then she encounters a stranger who makes demands.

Elijah asks her for water. And she doesn't speak. But she moves to get the water. And as she walks away - Elijah, in what seems to me to be the height of entitlement - says, "Oh, yes and bring me a morsel of baked bread, too."

Elijah in who he was - a man of God - obedient and trusting in the mercy and grace and provision of God - could not help but ask the woman for food. But also, as a man of God, he could not have helped but notice her devastated form, her speechless acquiescence to his request for water, her resignation. At least he only asked for a morsel of food - his daily bread.

I can imagine what she felt.

It's that same sort of hopelessness I get when I watch birds covered in crude oil limp to shore. Or my despair when I hear about continued violence and discrimination in the Holy Land. Or when we listen to stories from the war torn areas of our world. Or visit the border of Mexico and learn about those who are exploited by smugglers and then left in the desert. Or feel the longings and weariness of those living in Cuba. When I was there a few weeks ago, things had gotten so bad that one woman told me that the only work left to do in Cuba was God's work.

There are thousands of stories that make me want to shout out and shake my fist. There are a thousand stories that make me realize just how far I am removed from that amazing state of grace - that green valley where I totally and utterly allow myself to feel

just how much I am, how we are all, supposed to live in fullness of life - if only we would make the choice to follow God's call to live there.

But - still - I can only imagine how she feels. Because I have never had to live where she lives or make the choices she had to make to keep herself and her son alive. I'm more like Elijah - I see the pain of the world, but I keep asking for what I want anyway....

I can imagine how it all looked, however, in a much stronger way.

We here at Westminster are so blessed by the all of artists among us. The week that many of the artists had their work up for auction in the dining room gallery was truly amazing. I always love what is displayed - and appreciate how generous these folks are with their art.

After the art auction, a new installation went in. I don't know how many of you have seen it yet. It's an installation by Susan Naum. And one of her larger canvases caught my eye and my heart.

When you walk in the dining room, it's on the far wall - and you can't miss it. The moment I saw it, I thought of the widow of Zarephath.

The painting called "Between a Rock and a Hard Place."

In the foreground is a woman wearing a turban and wrapped in traditional desert clothing. A band of cloth binds a baby to her side and one arm cradles it tightly. The other arm is stretched down and back to her side. In the background, riding away from her on camel, is a man swathed in desert garb, his face turned back over his shoulder to look at her. I can't tell if she is running and her hand is swinging back to aid her momentum. Or if she is walking and her hand is held back in fear.

The sky is strongly blue - but busy with color and light. The earth is burning reddish brown - packed hard against the sun. A spare and black tree stands along the road.

The baby's lips are open and eyes are closed. The mother's eyes are cast down upon him - but there is no feeling in her face - no indication of what she's thinking - as she considers her next steps. She's between a rock and a hard place. Just like the widow, I thought. Trying to decide what to do, what to say, what to decide, when choosing between two devastating things. Do I give away what I have to a stranger and die one day sooner. Or do I keep it and die day one day later?

When I called Susan to ask her permission to talk about her work this morning, I asked her where the images came from. She explained they came from the Sudan - from learning about the choices women have to make in a world dominated by the Janjaweed fighters. This painting was about whether or not she would leave the relative safety of her camp to find food for her child. For if the men left, they would surely be killed. But if a woman left, she may find food, but she would most certainly be attacked and sexually assaulted. These were her choices.

In our story, when confronted by this choice, the widow of Zarephath sort of snaps, I think.

Many commentators think that she is polite or desperately seeking Yahweh's favor. But I think she's being kind of accusatory. "As the Lord your God lives," she

starts out. As the Lord **your** God lives and shows power by stopping the rains - not just against those in power - not just against those who have insulted the law and broken the covenant - but against those of us who are powerless and vulnerable - against those of us who are just trying to live our lives - As the Lord **your** God lives, **I'm** starving here. I've got only this little bit of meal, a drop of oil, let alone anything baked! So, as **your** God **lives**, I am preparing myself to **die**.

Astonishing words.

Susan writes in her "Artist Statement" that goes with her show,

My primary motivation as a painter comes from a deep and inner conflict over my role in society. By no merit of my own, I am fortunate to have resources, countless opportunities and the freedom to speak and act in any way I choose. In the face of all this, I am often plagued with guilt over the role I play in perpetuating the inequities of the world. I struggle between the desire to act responsibly vs. the tendency toward self-preservation and comfort.... The larger paintings became an exploration of the landscape through different eyes. What would it be like to stand before such vast empty spaces? How would it feel to face that harsh, threatening landscape and know that the survival of my family depended upon me entering it?

Before I knew what Susan was intending to convey in her painting, in my imagination, I saw a moment of strength captured there. I imagined that the woman in the painting had just finished her short speech to Elijah and had walked away from him. The Janjaweed fighter on the camel became Elijah, looking back at her in astonishment. For me, it was a moment of victory for the woman and a moment of exquisite awareness for Elijah.

For he responds with those most gentle and beloved words in the Bible, "Fear not," he says. "Fear not." And we know the rest...

The food never runs out. There is a reality of abundance beneath the surface of the scarcity. We cannot explain it. Heck, we are so removed from it that we can't really see it. But it is there - like the miracle of the jar of meal and the oil, like the miracle of the loaves and the fish - like this table here. Like the unending, unencompassed power of God's love and mercy - it is there. It is, as one theologian said, an abiding astonishment that keeps us telling the story, which, in turn, reopens us to a life fully open to the gifts of God. (Martin Buber)

There is life and death, there is a rock and a hard place in each and every choice that we make. And this is especially true for those of you who are graduating high school today and moving on into the next part of life. This is true for all of you young people out there. For all of you will live in the whole world more than any of us. You

will move far and wide if you so choose. The whole world is open for you in ways that it has never been open for many of the rest of us. You will be global citizens in ways we can't even imagine.

Remember, as you go out into the world - it is true that for us - for all of us - that our abundance truly lies in these choices and opportunities and freedoms that we have.

We have this incredible freedom, this amazing, astonishing place from which to engage in the world. And we need not feel guilty!

For we can choose life for all when we spend with accountability, live with what we need instead of what we want, when educate ourselves about the world and sacrifice even a bit of our comfort so that fair wages and good jobs and safe drinking water and food and books and technology and medicine can be provided for all. We can choose this when we say with each breath, "Fear not.... Fear not."

You know, there is something hidden in Susan's paintings - the larger canvases. They used to be different paintings. Part of how she responded to her conflicted feelings - to her rock and hard place - was to take some large landscapes of the Italian countryside that she had fairly well completed and paint over them. She turned the canvases upside down and covered the idyllic (and more appealing, meaning perhaps, more salable landscapes) with a wash. Then using a variety of techniques, she added and subtracted to the canvas. The effect made me curious. The intentional unfinished, unclear and transparent areas in the landscape and in the people accomplish what she intended, I think. By making it so that we could sort of see through these figures, she hoped to convey that their very identities are at risk of being erased.

But I also see something else hidden there.

I think like all of us, the women in these paintings move back and forth between what can become the dominant reality - the power/political reality and the reality that underpins and under girds and sustains everything - the beautiful landscape, the green valley. Truly as they flicker back and forth, they represent what the artist was trying for: vulnerability and strength, fear and courage, resistance and yielding, despair and hope. This is the place where we all live, in truth. This is where we live with Elijah and the widow.

The political landscape, the power landscape is not the reality that, in the end, shines through. The true reality is God's. There is a reality of abundance beneath the surface of the scarcity. Remember how Bruggeman said it?

"Omri and Ahab may have their way for a very long time...but not finally."

Thanks be to God.