

“First, Listen to the Lord”

What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do? I don’t necessarily mean the task that was the most physically demanding. I mean the thing that you found most mentally challenging. Or perhaps, even more to the point, what’s the most difficult decision you’ve had to make?

I know very well that many of our members and friends here at Grace have had to make some very difficult decisions. You’ve had to make decisions about college majors and careers and family issues and friends and all sorts of other weighty matters. Another difficult decision that comes to mind is the decision to stop extraordinary medical treatment for a loved one when God seems to be calling that person home to heaven. It isn’t easy to decide when to say goodbye.

I can’t help but compare that sort of a decision to those faced by the widow woman from Zarephath that we heard about in our sermon text this morning. That woman had already made a very difficult decision by the time we met her on the pages of Scripture. She lived in a land that was in the midst of a severe famine. She had watched all of her supplies dwindle until all that she had left was a little bit of oil and a handful of flour. I can picture her setting it aside and going hungry for days perhaps, hoping to find an alternative solution. Her young son no doubt cried out in hunger.

And so she decided it was time. She would gather enough sticks to make a small fire to bake on, and she would make one last little piece of bread. She would break off a generous amount to give to her son, and she would slowly nibble on the rest. And then they would wait for the inevitable.

As she went about gathering her sticks, a man called out to her, “Could you please bring me a little water?” It was a bold request in a land so overwhelmed with drought. It was a bold request from a man who had previously received water from a flowing brook that by that time had dried up completely. But she could help him out. After all, she wouldn’t be needing that water much longer. Then as she turned to go, he asked for a piece of bread. Surely he would change his mind, she thought, when she told him about her situation. But he didn’t. To her shock, he said, “Get me something to eat first. The Lord will take care of you.”

The Bible reports, **“She went away and did as Elijah had told her.”** Yet, I can’t help but wonder how she must have struggled with that decision. I can picture her staring at her jug of oil and jar of flour wondering, “Am I really going to do this? Am I really going to start by making bread for someone else?” And she did.

What would lead someone to do what she did? What would lead someone to take from her last little bit of food to feed someone else? The answer is the word of the Lord. This is what God’s prophet had told her: **“Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.”**¹⁴ **For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’”** It was all but unbelievable, but she believed it.

And why would she believe it? It can be for no other reason than this: that this was not the word of man but the promise of God. She believed it because she had faith. She believed it because God said it. She had no other guarantee.

And so often we stand in the same place as that widow from Zarephath. So often we face situations where we can see no visible evidence that God will keep his promises, no guarantee that the word of the Lord is

true. And for many of us, we know how our sinful nature falters and doubts and wonders. And God's word says to us: first listen to the Lord.

The word of the Lord once called you out of the darkness of unbelief. The word of the Lord gave power to the waters of your baptism. It told you of the Savior who forgives all doubt, the Savior who proclaimed himself to be the promised Messiah. The Holy Spirit worked through that word to lead you to believe that Jesus Christ is your Savior from sin.

And now it invites you to listen to the Lord and to live your faith in every aspect of your life. Allow me to offer an example. As the Lord through his prophet commanded the widow to first give some bread to Elijah and promised that he would take care of all her needs, so he invites us to worship him by giving generously out of our incomes, trusting that he will provide for all of our needs. We know how tempting it is to say or to think, "If I give too much in my offerings, there won't be enough left. After all, I have plenty of responsibilities that I need to fulfill." First, listen to the Lord. He says, **"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"** (Matthew 6:33). Then, give your generous offerings, cheerfully trusting that God will take care of all your needs.

Or perhaps you are facing some sort of suffering or loss. God says, no matter what it looks like to you, that he will work out all things for the good of those he has called. Perhaps he has in mind for you to be an example to others, even in suffering. Perhaps he has in mind to bring you relief. First, listen to the Lord. Then, let your light shine in whatever circumstance he places you.

Against all odds and against all appearances, the widow of Zarephath trusted God. And God proved that he was worthy of her trust. As he promised, he miraculously provided so that one handful of flour did not run out throughout the entire time of the famine, nor did the small jar of oil run dry.

And even though God has proven himself true to his word on many occasions like this, there are still many who reject what he says. One of the reasons that Elijah was sent to the widow in Zarephath was because of the unbelieving rejection of so many in the land of Israel at the time. In our Gospel today (Luke 4:20-32), Jesus compared his own situation with that of Elijah. Just as Elijah's own people had rejected Elijah as God's prophet, so the people of Jesus' own hometown of Nazareth would reject him as their Messiah and Savior. And both went elsewhere to continue the work that God had given them to do.

There is a stern warning for us in this. We have God's word, in its truth and purity. But as sinful human beings we have the capacity to reject it and turn away from it. We have the ability to refuse to listen or to put our own thoughts and plans and ideas above what God has said. We can in our hearts and minds do the same thing that the people of Nazareth did when they tried to throw Jesus off of the cliff. And when we reject God's word, there is no guarantee that we will have another opportunity.

But by God's grace, we have the opportunity right now. As our second lesson from Romans (10:18-11:6) pointed out, God's grace means that there are no strings attached or hoops to jump through. God didn't choose the widow at Zarephath because she did what he told her to do. He chose her by grace, purely out of his own love, and in love gave her the opportunity to serve him and the faith to do what she did. And he chose us by grace, not because of the money that we would give to church or the testimony that we would give in the world. He chose us by grace, only because of his love for us.

And by grace he gives us many opportunities to hear and to listen to his word. Every week his word is proclaimed here in sermons and hymns and liturgy. Many times each week believers gather here to study that word together and to encourage one another with it. Here he has gathered together many to whom he has given the gift of faith and whom he calls to live in a way that flows from their faith. And this is where the life of faith begins: first listen to the Lord.

Sermon Text: 1 Kings 17:7–16 (NIV84)

⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.” ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.

¹⁴ For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’ ”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.