

**+ 1 Kings 17:7-16 + The Word Goes Where You Least Expect It +
+ 4th Sunday after the Epiphany + 1 February 2015 +**

“You want me to go where?” Elijah had delivered a devastating message from the Lord to wicked King Ahab. **“As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”** (1 Kings 17:1) The news was devastating because Israel desperately needed the rain and even the daily dew to keep the crops alive. Drought and famine were coming soon because King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had led the people of Israel to reject the true God for the fertility gods Baal and Asherah. Their wickedness knew no bounds as they slaughtered God’s prophets and desecrated God’s holy name.

After hearing God’s judgment, Ahab and Jezebel wanted Elijah dead, but the Lord had other plans. God sent his prophet off into the wilderness away from Israel. God promised to provide food brought by ravens twice a day and water to drink from a brook, but what eventually happens when a severe drought sets in? Water dries up. The flowing brook became a trickle and then nothing. What would he do to survive? Elijah had to go elsewhere. So God had a plan. **“Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.”**

“You want me to go where?” For us, **“Zarephath of Sidon”** means nothing, but for Elijah, it meant traveling to the pagan region north of Israel—the homeland of evil Queen Jezebel who had introduced the demonic worship of Baal to Israel. Of all the places of refuge, God wanted him to go there?

Elijah certainly didn’t expect that, but God had another surprise. **“A widow”** would supply Elijah with food. Widows weren’t wealthy. They were dependent on the ability of their sons to take care of them, if they had a son old enough to help. They were barely able to care for themselves, let alone anyone else. Could the Lord really provide through a poor widow in a pagan land during a severe drought that was quickly causing a severe famine?

It was the last place he expected, yet Elijah **“went to Zarephath.”** He didn’t ask God “Why?” or “Isn’t there a better option?” The prophet didn’t object to God’s unusual command. He just went because he trusted that the Lord knew what he was doing even if it was the last place he expected to go.

How would this prophet of the true God be received in the homeland of Baal? Would the Lord come through on his promise? How would he know which widow the Lord had chosen? How long would she be able to help him? The questions raced through Elijah’s mind as he made the long journey to Zarephath, but the Lord had answers waiting at the town gate.

There was no armed guard searching for a scruffy-looking prophet of the true God, but there was **“a widow...gathering sticks.”** She was preparing to cook a meal, and Elijah was exhausted from his journey. So he called out to her, **“Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” As she was going to get it, he called, ‘And bring me, please, a piece of bread.’**” Elijah was thirsty and hungry from the journey, but there was another reason he asked for some bread. This was the widow through whom the Lord was going to help him, but the Lord was going to test her first as he had tested his prophet in sending him to this unexpected place.

“As surely as the LORD your God lives...I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I’m gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.” “I’m sorry, but you want me to do what?” The woman was penniless. She was picking up sticks to prepare her actual last meal. She and her son were down to only a little oil sloshing around at the bottom of a jug and a handful of flour in a jar. They’d be able to make maybe one small biscuit...and that would be it. There’d be no more food for her or her son. Hunger would soon overtake them, and because of the drought and the famine, no one else would be in a position to help them either.

God’s Word, however, had come to an unexpected place to do something that Elijah and the widow least expected. As he had for Elijah, the Lord had a plan for this widow and her son. 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. 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.’”** The Lord had rejected his own people for their wickedness and

unbelief, but in mercy, he turned his blessing towards this unexpected widow. He would provide for all three of them miraculously until the rains returned.

The Word of God led the woman to trust Elijah's words. She hurried home and ***“did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 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.”*** God's Word accomplished what they least expected.

This Epiphany season we've seen how God has revealed his Light to the nations. That Light, that Word made flesh, was seen in places far more unexpected than Zarephath—a feeding trough in Bethlehem, a backwater village called Nazareth, a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee, a place of execution outside the city of Jerusalem. Notice how undeserving, humble, inglorious, even shameful those places were where God revealed the Word made flesh—his Son Jesus Christ. It wasn't in the palace of the Roman emperor or before the great altar in God's temple in Jerusalem. It wasn't in a grand arena or before a packed theater, but in unexpected places just as God had sent his Word to that unexpected widow in Zarephath.

Jump forward 2,000 years and you see the same thing happening. The Word goes where you least expect it. It's rejected by those who consider themselves deserving in God's sight. It's rejected by the self-righteous and often rejected by the humanly great and glorious. Instead, the Word goes to the broken, the battered, the suffering, the abused, the ridiculed, the weak, the grieving, the unpopular, the ordinary, and of course, the sinner. Time and again the Word goes where you least expect it—to people like you and me.

Why would the Lord do that? Why did God help his prophet who later had his own share of doubts? Why did the Lord remove his blessing from Israel, but then helped an unexpected widow in a pagan place? Why did Jesus walk the dusty roads of this sinful world, put himself in the place of the undeserving, and suffered need, want, loss and death? Why does his Word continue to do the unexpected for undeserving people like you and me through words on a page, water poured, and a little bread and wine?

It's not because any of us have earned or deserved such blessing. In fact, by nature we have no reason to expect it, but the Lord has a reason why his Word does such unexpected things. That reason is grace—God's undeserved loving-kindness that sacrifices himself and spares no expense to save those who have no reason to expect it.

The Lord showed that grace in providing for his prophet, the widow, and her son in a miraculous, unexpected way. The Lord showed that grace by sending a Savior to us who deserve him not and should expect him not. That Savior—the same Lord of free and faithful grace—came to live and help, to suffer and die, to rise again, and through it all, to save you.

That's what's so unexpected about grace. You don't expect to see the Lord of heaven and earth in the form of a helpless infant lying in a manger. You don't expect to see the Ruler of all submit willingly to his parents. You don't expect to see the Lord weep at the loss of a loved one, yet turn every funeral he attended into a celebration of life restored. You don't expect to see the King of kings humble himself to endure the blows of undeserving men, the curses of wicked people, and the cross deserved by every one of us. You don't expect to see the Lord of life allow death to take his life as the ransom payment for all the undeserving, but then take that life up again for us all.

The Word still goes where and does what you least expect. The imposing intimidator becomes an ambassador of reconciliation. The hardened skeptic becomes a faithful witness. The obsessed persecutor becomes a passionate apostle. The hostile sinner becomes a beloved child of God.

Now we dare not forget that at one time, we were dead. We were hostile. We were blind and ignorant and headed for hell, but the Word brought Jesus into our lives. Then that Word with the waters of Holy Baptism brought each of us to faith. As we heard last week, the stories of how you and I got here are different, but the result is the same, because the Word went where we least expected and did what we didn't expect in our lives.

Now through you, the Lord sends his Word into the unexpected lives of loved ones and colleagues, neighbors and friends, co-workers and classmates. Like Elijah and the widow, they have no reason to expect it, but perhaps they, too, will rejoice like Elijah and the widow, because the Word made flesh does the unexpected in

their lives. May the Lord send his Word to unexpected places to do unexpected things so many others may join us in that place of eternal, unexpected joy—the glories of heaven! Amen.