

Sermon by Dan Ince, St. Michael the Archangel, El Segundo,  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen

It's one thing for us to do God's will when it coincides with our own will but it takes faith when it doesn't. Then it becomes a matter of trust, and that's what I would like to focus on today. As a people of faith, we're called to put our trust in God. This is especially true when God leads us in directions that we wouldn't otherwise go and calls us to do things that we wouldn't otherwise do. As it says in Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord."

The story from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings that we heard this morning concerns the prophet Elijah and a nameless widow of Zarephath. This is up north of Palestine, in what is now Lebanon. This is a very unusual story because everything about it runs contrary to human logic.

To better understand this reading, we also need to learn what was written earlier. The people of Israel had reached a highwater mark during the reign of King David. He had defeated their enemies, and consolidated the nation. Then his son, Solomon, took advantage of the peace and prosperity of the day to build the great Temple in Jerusalem. However, after Solomon, things had quickly gone downhill with later generations. There were exceptions, of course, but most of Solomon's prodigy turned out to be ruthless and corrupt. Over and over, we're told in the scriptures about the various kings, "... he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord".

In time, the nation was divided. There was the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Our story from this

morning takes place in Israel and, in particular, in the land of Samaria, which was ruled by King Ahab. The year is somewhere in the 9th Century, B. C. and Ahab had arranged to be married to the daughter of the king of Phoenicia. Her name is Jezebel and, if this were a soap opera instead of a worship service, you could boo and hiss at the sound of her name because she was bad news.

We have to remember that this marriage was about politics and not about romance or love. The goal of the marriage was to cement a commercial and military alliance which gave Israel access to the prosperous port cities of Tyre and Sidon and gave the Phoenicians control of the trade routes to Egypt.

However, the fact that the Phoenicians were descendants of the Canaanites and worshipped the false god, Ba-al didn't enter into the marriage negotiations. Then, as now, politics had little to do with religion.

So, the marriage took place and, when Jezebel moved to Israel, she brought her priests, her idols and her pagan worship practices with her. The Jewish faith in the one true God, creator of the heavens and the earth, meant nothing to her. Once she moved into the palace, she established her power base, and arranged to have the Jewish priests put to death. As a result, Israel was on the fast track to become a pagan nation.

The prophet Elijah came onto the scene at this point. He went straight to King Ahab and pronounced God's judgment: "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years except according to my word." As punishment for their unfaithfulness, not a drop of rain would fall for the next three and a half years.

Since we're living in Southern California, we've all experienced the effects of extended drought situations. Sometimes, it seems like we've gone without rain forever. Watering restrictions have been imposed and a lot of the lawns and other vegetation have died. For the people of Israel, the drought lasted for a long three and half years. As food and water became scarce, God told Elijah, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So, he set out and went to Zarephath."

To put this into context, Sidon was in the land of the Phoenicians and that was where Jezebel had just come from. No Jew in his right mind would voluntarily go to Sidon, and yet, this is where God was sending Elijah.

And not only that, God told him that there would be a widow there to provide for him. I've read in a number of places that widows in that time were at the very bottom rung of society's ladder and that, in general, women, as a group, didn't fare much better. They were dependent on a husband or sons to protect and provide for them. And if their husband died and their children were too young, they were often forced to beg or turn to a life of prostitution.

Given that tragic situation, it seems to me that it would be extremely unlikely that Elijah would choose on his own to go to Zarephath and, once there, to expect a lowly widow to take care of him. Yet, that's exactly what God told him to do. So, he answered God's call and went to Zarephath. When he got there, the scripture says, "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."

Being the underdog, she didn't protest. She went to fetch him a cup of water. But, as she was going, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." Since Elijah was a stranger and a

foreigner, I'm sure that this request surprised her and she answered, "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." This poor widow is down to her last cup of meal and her last teaspoon of olive oil. Once that was gone, she and her son would die of starvation. Yet, here was a stranger, not only asking for a cup of water, but for a piece of the last bread that she would ever bake. On the surface, it didn't make any worldly sense. However, Elijah 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. For 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."

I think that these readings are a test of their blind trust and faith in God. Just as God had tested Elijah by sending him to Zarephath, God was also testing this poor widow by asking her to give Elijah the first portion of what she is convinced would be her and her son's last meal. She doesn't know Elijah and he's not from her family so she isn't obligated to show him hospitality. It comes down to a matter of trust. I wonder if I would have that much blind trust in a stranger if I were in her place. However, as the scripture says, "She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The 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."

However, that's not the end of the story. As Elijah stayed on as a guest in her house, her son became so sick that he had stopped breathing. She ran to Elijah, partly blaming him but mainly crying for help. Elijah turned to the Lord, and miraculously, the boy came back to

life. In gratitude and devotion, the woman said to Eligah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth".

What does this story of trust tell us about Jesus? I'm sure that Jesus knew exactly what would happen to him when he went to Jerusalem. When he came down from the Mount of the Transfiguration, he told his disciples, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised up."

I don't think that Jesus wanted to suffer and die a horrible death any more than we would if we were in his place. He wanted to live to continue doing God's work. We heard this in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

I don't think that Jesus left Galilee and went to Jerusalem just because he wanted to see the sights or to get away from the crowds. He went because he trusted that it was God's will that he sacrifices his life. He was willing to trust God to lead Him on the way, even if it meant dying on a cross for the sins of the world.

It was a matter of trust, just as it's a matter of trust for us today as we seek to walk in Jesus' footsteps. We've heard the story about how Peter and Andrew had fished all night but caught nothing. The next morning, Jesus came along and said, "Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch." Peter and Andrew were seasoned fishermen and probably thought, "What did Jesus know about fishing?" Plus, they were exhausted from the night before. Why would they go back out on to the Sea of Galilee and try again? But Peter said, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Because of Peter's trust in the Lord, they caught so many fish that it nearly sank their boat.

We've read in John's Gospel that Jesus' friend Lazarus had died and his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent for him. When he got there, Martha rushed out to greet him, and, as he consoled her, he told her that her brother would live again. Then he went on to say, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will still live, even if he dies. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Then he looked at Martha and asked her point blank, "Do you believe this?" Martha trusted Jesus and believed in what Jesus had told her.

That's the question for us today and every day, isn't it? Do we believe in the gospel and believe that God loves us? Do we believe in our deepest being that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins? Are we willing to put our trust in Christ to lead and guide us and to use us as an instrument of God's peace and love? It all comes down to a matter of faith and blind trust.

I read a poem by John Stammers, who wrote:

"When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey."

Thanks be to the God of love who asks us to put our trust in Him and Amen.