



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Glimpses of Compassion**  
A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

June 13, 2010  
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

**1 Kings 17:8-24**

## **1 Kings 17:8-24**

*Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "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. 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." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But 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." 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." 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.*

*After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."*

*This is the word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.*

My husband and I met at Pittsburgh Seminary. He was a student there first, and the following year I began my studies. We actually met, briefly, when I came down to visit and tour the school. He was working at the desk in the library. I never thought much more about the meeting (though I like to think he pinned after me until I finally gave in and agreed to have dinner with him). His Greek Professor was my Academic Advisor, and both of us had a great fondness for him. In fact, Dr. Kelly was beloved in Pittsburgh, as a friend, a teacher, a man of deep convictions and abiding faith. And he was a very good teacher; he made the ancient Greek of the New Testament come alive for his students; he taught classes on Scripture that lifted up academic study, while energizing his students for the preaching of the Gospel Message. He made theology real in a powerful way. He touched hundreds and hundreds of lives at the seminary and in and around Pittsburgh with his teaching and preaching. When Patrick and I decided to get married, it was Dr. Kelly we asked to counsel and then marry us. And this he did with the kindness and joy we had come to expect from him.

As you can imagine, his life was very full. Because of that, it was quite a surprise to Patrick and me when, after leaving the seminary, we began to get a Christmas Letter from him each year. And not just a letter detailing what's happened in his life over the last 365 days, but a letter to us, remembering the hot September day when we were married and the birth of first our son, then, as the years passed, our daughters, mentioning each by name. He never failed to make his Christmas Letter a gift to us in the way he placed value on our relationship with him year after year. And this is the way he was – for us and for the many students who crossed his path through his ministry. Even as he continued to preach and teach, offering a public and vibrant ministry of the Gospel, he took time to attend to and nurture the quieter pieces of his ministry through the years.

First Kings is one of the historical books in our Old Testament. The early chapters describe the nature of the united kingdom of Israel as it was when ruled by King Solomon. Following the death of Solomon, we're told that the son of Solomon, Rehoboam, was a harsh king and under his reign, the kingdom divided. This book goes on to describe the succession of kings that followed that are frequently described by some variation of the

phrase: *'he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.'* It was into this political and theological landscape that Elijah was called to serve when Ahab was king of Israel. And Ahab, as we know from last week's reading, introduced Baal worship into Israel. *'He made the GOD of Israel angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together,'* as Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message.

Elijah's ministry propelled him into a series of confrontations with both Ahab and his wife Jezebel that alternately fired him up and terrified him. Their political power was extensive and Elijah frequently found himself the target of their anger. It was a tumultuous time for Israel and for a Prophet of God. Our look at the *Contest on Mount Carmel* last week gave us a taste of Elijah's world and the wavering faithfulness of the people. His call for decision in a bold, even cinematic way was meant to demonstrate to all that Yahweh was the God who loved them and was faithful even as they limped along with wavering hearts.

Given all that was going on in the world, this reading from First Kings today seems a bit out of sync with the rest of Elijah's ministry. There are no grand indictments of a king; no chastisements for the people's faithlessness; no dire prophecies of what's to come; just Elijah, a very poor widow and her young son.

And yet, God is at work in powerful ways.

Elijah's ministry in Sidon began with God's rather puzzling instructions sending him to a widow to be fed. Of all the places for someone to find help in Israel, a widow's home was not a likely place. Life was difficult for women without a husband, as we see in this passage. We can't help but marvel at Elijah's boldness in accepting her help, after she'd described their desperation. Yet Elijah persists. He's been sent by God and trusts God even in this place where death appears to be close at hand. Whether the woman is moved by Elijah's promise, his faith in God, or a commitment to the ancient code of hospitality, we do not know. What we do know is that she does what none of us here would ask her to do: she uses the last of her resources to feed her guest. And, in doing so, receives the

blessing of abundant oil and grain. In the midst of certain death, life springs forth.

This quiet, understated glimpse of God at work is followed by another when the woman's son dies. Her grief nearly jumps off the page as, again, hopelessness takes up residence in her home. This time Elijah initiates an audience with God, pleading for the return of child's life. His heart wrenching words called on the compassion of God to save the child of the mother who had dealt compassionately with him. And again, in the midst of death, life springs forth.

How does the Greatest Prophet in the Old Testament whose ministry took him into the audience of kings, court officials, and prophets of other gods, find himself in the ordinary desperation of life in a poor woman's home? How do these quiet, intimate miracles make their way into our Old Testament historical narratives, when national troubles and the struggle for Israel's faithfulness were ever present?

In a very real sense, these two stories of Elijah, the woman and her son remind us that our lives and what's happening within them have value, even in the midst of a world where events are unfolding on a large scale. Hope, the kind of hope that moves us to see God at work, takes shape, even in the quietest corners. These moments – these glimpses of miracles - are an important part of the unfolding story of God's people. And, our intentional ministry to and care for one another is a venue through which God is at work.

There are many ways in which we as a congregation already enter into such ministries of care: our weekly prayers in worship and as groups gathered throughout the week sustain those for whom we pray and remind us of the joys and needs our brothers and sisters; our care at times of loss in the shape of worship and meals, visits and cards offers a significant message of life in the midst of death; the ongoing ministry of friends and family as visits are made reminds us that we are the body of Christ together, even when one in our midst is struggling. Over the next several months we'll be learning about a new and very intentional ministry of care known as Stephen Ministry. This very powerful lay program invites

us to enter into each other's lives at just those places where a Christian friend can help us experience God at work in our lives. This committed caring relationship is a venue through which the message of life might be heard as hard times threaten to silence it. The power of the resurrection: *life continues to spring forth*, is the churches unique message to each other in the face of death.

Through Elijah's ministry we are also given a window that looks out into those national and worldwide events at what's possible when God is at work: a world in which grace has a place and the potential to shape events. A world in which faith has the power to interrupt what's *normal* and point us to what's *possible* when life-giving changes are sought. Just as a poor woman and her son, forgotten by the society around her, received new life, so do these narratives invite us to engage the stories of resurrection in the corners of our world where life has become hopeless.

This is the message we take when we go through the doors of the church and enter new places of ministry. In a few minutes we will be commissioning our Middle School Youth and their Leaders for a week of service in South Carolina. They will leave Rockingham County taking what they've learned and experienced about God's love in their lives, and will offer it through the work of their hands and hearts to people they have yet to meet.

Like Elijah, they come as the hands and feet of God's love. And in their work they will offer hope. Hope that comes from the God who created and loves us; hope that took shape when meal and oil did not run out; hope that springs from the life-giving waters of baptism; hope that was shared when Jesus first broke bread with His disciples, and continues to reach us around the table this morning; hope that reminds us of abundant life in Christ.

Let us pray...

God of life, enter into our days in such a way that we are able to see you at work, transforming what is ordinary. Open our eyes to see life springing forth through your hand of grace. Through Christ we pray, Amen.