

Today we begin 5 week series of Old Testament lessons about the Prophet Elijah, and his successor, the Prophet Elisha. Elijah is still regarded by the Jewish people as their greatest prophet. And his protégé Elisha is almost as important. 5 weeks of readings about them only scratches the surface—I wish the lectionary included twice as much about them. Alas, we'll have to make do with 5 weeks only.

However, before we dive into the first of our readings, I want preface my remarks with a few general comments about prophets, especially as they relate to kings. Then I want to add a few specific comments about Elijah and his relationship to the specific king and queen of his time.

First Jewish prophets in general. Prophets were called to be God's spokesmen. They were called to pass on God's messages to his people.

But they had a secondary role that was almost as important. Prophets were called to provide checks and balances on the actions of the king. If the king overstepped his bounds, it was the prophet's job to reprimand him. It is no accident that the great age of the prophets began about the same time as the Jewish monarchy, and began to fade away at the same time the monarchy began to fade. Thus the prophets were continually called to stand up in the face of royal power and say, "Thus says the Lord."

This part of the prophetic job description was certainly a reality for the prophet Elijah. He was continually called to deliver tough messages to the king and queen of his day: Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab was the king over the northern 10 tribes of Israel. Yet he was not very faithful to the God of Israel. To make matters worse, he married a very strong-willed foreign princess: Jezebel.

Jezebel's father was king of a city-state in what we'd now call Lebanon. And Jezebel was a fanatic about following her gods, especially the god Ba'al, usually pronounced "Baal" in English. As you might imagine, Jezebel's unswerving loyalty to Baal put her in conflict with the prophets of Israel, most especially the Prophet Elijah.

What came to pass was a rather epic conflict between Prophet Elijah and Queen Jezebel. And even their names point to their differences. "Jezebel" can be translated, "Baal is Lord." And "Elijah" means, "Yahweh is God." In fact, the question of whether Baal or the God of Israel was the true god is at the heart of the entire cycle of stories about Elijah.

Now you might ask, "What's the big deal? So what if the queen worshipped Baal?" Well, it's a bit more complicated. At this point, monotheism had not yet taken hold, even among the Jewish people. And Baal worship was a constant temptation and trap for the Jewish people. Historically, the Jewish people found Baal worship very seductive. There were some logical reasons for this.

Yahweh, the Jewish God was the God who brought his people out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and eventually into the promised land.

But as the people settled in the promised land, they traded in their old, nomadic, desert lifestyle of being predominantly shepherds. They began a new, settled, agricultural lifestyle as farmers. And as they did so, many of them asked, 'Does our God really know anything about farming? Sure, he was a great God in the desert. But can he bring rain? Can he make crops grow?'

Besides, their pagan neighbors worshipped a god of fertility and rain, the god Baal. Because Baal provided rain and made the crops grow, he was regarded as the god who brings life.

Over the decades, a number of Jews began to hedge their bets. They began to diversify their religious portfolio. They began to worship Baal, either in place of or in addition to the God of Israel. This was a perennial problem for the Jewish people.

And when the king of Israel married a very strong, outspoken, powerful woman who was a fanatic follower of Baal, the stage was set for trouble.

Our OT lesson begins in the middle of ch17 (bulletins). At the beginning of that chapter, Elijah appears out of nowhere and prophesies a drought: "As the LORD the God of Israel lives... there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." And don't forget, when the word "LORD" appears in all caps in an English Old Testament, it's a stand in for the name "Yahweh."

"As the LORD (as Yahweh) the God of Israel lives... there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." The conflict is being set up in sharp terms. Who really controls the rain? Who really provides the fruits of the earth? Is it Baal, or Yahweh?

In fact, right after this pronouncement, almost as a living illustration, God sends Elijah out of the country, to what is now Jordan. There Elijah is miraculously fed by food brought to him by ravens. The implicit message here: "Yahweh provides."

Which brings us to our OT lesson. vv 8&9: God tells Elijah, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

This is an amazing thing. Zarephath is in Lebanon, in Jezebel's homeland. This is Baal's home turf.

Elijah goes there. He meets a widow. He asks her for water and food. Her reply in v12 is poignant:

"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."

What a sad state of affairs. The widow in Zarephath has just a tiny bit of grain and oil left to make one last meal for herself and her son. Then she expects them to starve to death.

There's a powerful message here. This is Baal's home territory. Yet Baal can't provide. Baal can't bring rain to his people. And the crops are not growing. They're enduring famine. They're running out of food.

In fact, to make it the message even sharper, Zarephath was famous in the eastern Mediterranean as a major exporter of wine, grain, and olive oil. Baal's homeland used to have such a surplus of food that they exported it. But now, they didn't have enough to even feed themselves.

But in v13, Elijah tells the widow: "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said (bake your loaf of bread); but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD (Yahweh) 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."

And in v15, she does what Elijah asks. And in v16 we're told, "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."

Who provides life? Who controls rain? Who brings forth the fruits of the earth? The message is clear. It's not Baal. It's the God of Israel. He is the true Lord of Life.

And to underscore this message, there is a second story about this widow of Zarephath.

v17 The widow's son becomes sick, and he dies.

v18 She blames Elijah and Elijah's God. In doing so, she falls into a common spiritual trap. She forgets what had happened previously. God has kept her and her son alive all this time miraculously providing food for them. God has kept her family alive. But now she blames God for her son's death.

Elijah intervenes. v19, he takes the boy up to his room. v21, he cries out to God, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"

I love this part. Elijah is doing the exact same thing as the widow did. He's human after all. He's forgetting how God has sustained them and kept them all alive. And he's blaming God because the kid got sick and died.

And yet, Elijah continues to pray. In fact, his prayer is unprecedented. v21 "O LORD my God (Yahweh my God), let this child's life come into him again." This is absolutely unprecedented. Up until this point in scripture, God has never raised anyone from the dead. And yet Elijah asks God to bring this boy back to life.

It's an amazing request. And God responds in an amazing way.

v22 "The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived."

God is not just the God who controls rain or provides food. God also brings life itself. In Baal's own country, Baal is powerless. Yahweh, the God of Israel, does what Baal cannot do.

Thus the response of the widow, v24, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

But the wonderful thing about this first chapter in the life of Elijah is that it's not just about the widow's growing realization of who God is. It's also about Elijah's relationship with God.

God gives Elijah a message to proclaim. And then God calls his prophet to move into an even deeper relationship with him. He is called to rely upon God more and more. To trust God's care for him through the ravens. To trust God's care of him through the widow's jars of flour and oil. To trust God even when things seem inexplicable, as when the widow's son died. To trust God enough to lay his confusion before God: "God, have you brought disaster?" "God, why did you do this?" And eventually to trust God enough that he can make a bold request: "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again."

The people of Israel were hedging their bets: "Should we trust God or Baal?" Elijah was calling them to trust God. And yet, he was also learning to trust God more and more himself.

It's an important lesson and reminder to all of us. To what extent do we put our trust in the living God?

I suspect we all pay him at least our lip service that we trust in him. "In God we trust." Sounds good as a motto. But is that really how you live your day-to-day life?

When you look at the food on your table, do you truly see God providing for you? Or do you see Market Street, or your bank account?

When you look at your bank account, do you truly see God providing for you? Or do you see the fruits of your own labor and talents?

When you look at your talents, do you truly see God providing for you by creating you that way? Or are you just lucky that the dice have rolled the way they have?

God called Elijah to be his prophet. But as Elijah was doing God's work, he was also learning more and more how to trust God.

God calls us to do his work. As we do so, may we be open to moving deeper and deeper in our relationship with him.