

Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Adult Bible Study
September 26, 2021
Remaining Faithful in Unfaithful Times

Session 2

We began this study by looking at the numbers which show the general decline in church attendance in Canada over the past several years. While there are many people who are not religious, there are no shortages of religions. Up until about 30 years ago Christianity was the predominant religion in Canada. But things have changed. Immigration has brought people to our land who practice many faiths that were previously unknown to most Canadians. There has been renewed interest in indigenous spirituality. The 40% of the population who identify as “spiritual but not religious” often practice various forms of blended faith, taking bits and pieces of various traditions and combining them into a personal faith. Even those who proclaim themselves to be “unreligious” hold a particular faith. Often, they will deny the supernatural, but at the same time affirm “faith in humanity,” or the dignity of each person. Though not always admitted, this too is a position of faith.

This plurality of faiths means that we need to be discerning as we look at the spiritual landscape which surrounds us. As we move on in the story of Elijah, we see that one of his primary roles was to help people discern the true God from the false gods that surrounded them. One of the things that made King Ahab different from previous kings of Israel, is that together with his wife, Jezebel, he began a deliberate program of religious pluralization. In 1 Kings 18 we learn that they imported 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah into Israel. These prophets feasted at the table of the Queen, which means they were given a favoured status. At the same time the prophets of God were persecuted. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would no longer be the predominant deity, but simply one among many.

So how does God make himself known in a pluralistic world? First, he calls Elijah (and us) completely out of our comfort zone.

The God of the Outsider

The shock value of Elijah’s encounter with the Widow of Zarephath is perhaps lost on us today. We tend to see it simply as a story of God’s provision for Elijah, the widow, and her son in a famine. But it is much more than a miracle story. When Jesus returned to Nazareth to preach his at his home synagogue, the people wanted him to do a miracle or two for them as he had done in other places. Jesus refuses and cites the example of Elijah and the Widow as part of his justification for not doing miracles in Nazareth. After Jesus said this to the people, they were ready to kill him, because this story teaches us that the true God isn’t just for the in crowd, but for the outsider. When the creek in the ravine at Kerith runs dry, Elijah is sent to a dirt poor, pagan, woman to be the one who though whom God will work to make himself known.

This woman lives on the margins of society, she is a widow and has no visible means of support outside relatives, friends, and charity. In addition, she serves a god, who like a virtually all other false gods, demands followers to stick to certain precepts to be blessed. She lives like many people today, captive to a world of fear.

Yet Elijah is sent to her rather than to an Israelite. What sets the true God apart from others is **grace**. Elijah says to her, “Do not be afraid.” This is more than a word of encouragement. Elijah is announcing God’s saving power to her and in so doing bringing her to faith in the true God.

Jesus uses the same expression to call those around him to faith.

- Mark 5:35-36
- John 6:16-21

Because she is liberated from a culture of fear, the widow does the outrageous thing. She makes Elijah a cake with the little bit of flour and the little bit of oil she has and much to her surprise, has enough of both to make cakes for herself and her son. For the remainder of the time of drought she does not run out of flour or oil.

In world where many reject the true God, we are called beyond our comfort zone to engage with the world around us and where many live in fear. We go to proclaim the good news. If a person you know has rejected the true God, it’s helpful to ask them what God they are rejecting. Often you will find their answer will reveal deep misunderstandings about God. Like the widow they may be trapped in a culture of fear, unaware of the vastness of the grace of God.

The Living God

But this is not the only way God calls us beyond our zone of comfort. When Elijah began his prophetic ministry, he proclaimed to Ahab the “Living God.” When Elijah comes to the widow, she recognizes he serves a God who is different from the gods of her people. She says to Elijah, “As the LORD your God lives ...”

This is a profound and potentially uncomfortable confession. An idol is a projection of the mind. It is a god designed by the mind to fit the mind; it does not do things or say things you do not understand or like. It is a god you control. Much of what passes for spirituality today is based upon finding/creating a god with whom you agree. In contrast, a living God who is gracious but also holy, just and sovereign will say and do things you do not agree with. God is not accountable to us and the next episode in the relationship between Elijah and the widow shows the living God.

After experiencing the miraculous feeding, the woman’s son becomes ill and dies. This is not something any parent would want but is the deepest of tragedies. The sovereign, living God has acted in a way contrary to both the widow’s and Elijah’s wishes.

Sometimes when these tragedies happen it is tempting to say that we don’t want to believe in a God who would allow (or maybe even will) such a thing to happen. We are tempted to opt for a god who is under our control and eager to do our bidding. A real God will not be tamed by us. A real God acts in ways utterly contrary to our minds and our desires.

But the real God, will also do amazing things beyond your wildest imaginings.

The Stretched-Out God

When the boy dies, the widow first assumes that her son has died for something she has done. When Elijah takes the child to the upper chamber where he had been staying, he also wonders if God is not punishing the woman for her sins.

But that is not the case.

The Living God restores the child to life again. Elijah stretches himself out three times over the child. He opens wide his arms over the boy and in so doing invites the punishment of God to fall upon him. He takes the position of ultimate vulnerability that the boy may live.

In so doing he points us ahead to Christ. The boy did not die to avenge an angry God. Instead, God's own Son will be stretched out on a cross to pay for all our sins. Many people imagine a god who is a god of grace, who loves and accepts all, no questions asked. Many other people imagine a god who is fierce and rules with sovereign justice. These gods are projections of our minds – gods who act as we want them to act or in ways that we can explain. But the Living God brings together perfect justice and perfect love in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

To quote Paul in the letter to the Romans, "God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

No other deity brings justice and grace together. This is beyond our wildest projections and our most outlandish imaginings.

The Power of the Word

One of the underlying themes Elijah's time with the widow of Zarephath is the power of God's Word, spoken by the prophet.

- For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.' -- 1 Kings 17:14
- The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah – 1 Kings 17:16
- And 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.' 1 Kings 17:24

Remaining faithful to God in unfaithful times begins with remaining in the Word of God.

Reaching out to the world around us is empowered by the Word of God.