

The Pride of Princes and the Fall of the Valiant
Text: 1 Kings 17:12
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
Remembrance Sunday
8 November 2009

Text: “But she said [to Elijah], ‘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.’”

There was a poor widow in the city of Zarephath. She lived there with her son. Why she was a widow, we don't know. Perhaps her husband was killed in battle. Zarephath, you see, belonged to the Phoenician city-state of Sidon. And Sidon was an important commercial centre and port, famous for its fine-crafted glass ware and its rare purple dye. There was money to be made if you controlled the glass and the dye industry, so Sidon was periodically under attack. Its neighbouring city-state to the south, Tyre, was a frequent rival. And Zarephath sat halfway between Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. So it seems reasonable to assume that the rulers of Sidon would recruit the men of Zarephath to protect their southern flank from the invading hordes of Tyre. And no doubt their patriotism and their honour were appealed to. You can imagine the recruiters coming into town and crying, “To arms, to arms. The barbarians of Tyre are about to invade our peaceful city. You must

protect the women and children of Sidon, and the civilized ways of our city-state.” They conveniently left out the part about protecting the *industries* of Sidon, and the owners of those industries and their profits, and the fact that Sidon would be just as likely to invade Tyre in 5 or 10 years to take control of *their* industry and *their* shipping.

So perhaps the widow of Zarephath once had a brave young husband. And he was caught-up in the fervour of protecting Sidon. So he left behind his wife and his little boy, and went off to war. No doubt it was with great courage that he fought on the Mediterranean plain south of the city. Perhaps he was leading a counter-attack when he fell. And with the name of his beloved on his lips, he died.

Brave men have been going to war for thousands of years. With honour and valour they have fought and died. And we owe a debt of gratitude which cannot be measured to those who’ve fought for justice and died for freedom already in this young century, and those who fought and died in the past century; a debt of gratitude as well to those with us today who put themselves in harm’s way, or were willing to do so. From the base of Vimy Ridge to the barren desert of Afghanistan, their courage and sacrifice – and yours – are to be praised and honoured by a grateful nation.

With honour and valour men have fought and died for centuries. But the princes and prime ministers who've sent them into battle have had less pure motives. For all those centuries, wars have been about the folly of rulers as much as they've been about the courage of soldiers. They've been about the control of industries and territory as much as they've been about protecting home and family.

100 years ago, as the clouds of war were gathering over Europe, a cartoon depicted the heads of the various nations whose young men would soon be tearing each other apart; these heads of state resplendent in their outlandish uniforms. The caption read, "I don't know if the world is led by geniuses who are putting us on, or imbeciles who really mean it."

Then and now, the leaders of nations have craved more and more resources and territory and power and wealth. And they've been more than willing to shed not their *own* blood, but the blood of their young men and women, in order to get it.

So it was that in the 9th century B.C., a young woman lost her husband, and a little boy lost his father, and some years later the prophet Elijah found them in the city of Zarephath, in the midst of a drought, starving to death.

She thought they were going to die. So imagine her shock when this stranger, this *Israelite*, asked her for some food. She said, “Listen, bud, don’t you know there’s a drought on?! *Your* God has brought on this drought because he’s angry with *your* king? And now you have the nerve to ask *me* for food?” But then she thought about it a bit more and she said, “Oh, what the heck, we’re going to die anyway; I might as well offer hospitality to this poor fool.”

But Elijah wasn’t the fool whom he appeared to be. Because he knew that even in the midst of what appears to be scarcity, God is a God of abundance. You just have to trust that fact. In fact, you have to trust it so much that even in your apparent scarcity, you offer God the first and the best of what you have. Not the leftovers, but the first and the best. The widow offered God – or, at least, she offered this servant of God – a bit of bread and water *before* she prepared the little that she had for herself and her son. She offered God the first and the best, she saved the leftovers for her family, and you know what happened? She *still* had food, until the rains came, and a new crop was grown, and her supplies replenished.

It’s about *abundance*. It’s about *trusting* God’s abundance. Indeed, it’s about trusting *God*.

On the isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland, there is an abbey and a retreat centre. Founded by St. Columba in the 6th century, its missionaries helped to reintroduce Christianity to Europe after the fall of Rome and the collapse of Roman civilization. But in later centuries the abbey itself fell into disrepair and was abandoned. Until the 1930's, when the Iona community was re-founded by George MacLeod. MacLeod was a hero from the First World War, who had been so sickened by the horrors of the battlefield that he became a pacifist. Then God called him to create a place where Christians could find rest and renewal; a place where they could be touched by the presence of God; a place where they would find peace within their souls, so that they in turn could create peace in the world.

Iona was the chosen place. But when MacLeod arrived there with a small group of disciples, he found nothing but the ruins of the old buildings. Clearly the place would have to be rebuilt, and they would need lumber to do it. But by now the Second World War had begun, and most of the lumber was being used in the war effort. In fact, lumber was so scarce that it had to be brought in from Canada. It wasn't long after MacLeod and his party arrived at Iona that a ship full of lumber was making its way from Canada to Scotland. But it got

into trouble in the stormy waters off Iona. In danger of sinking, the captain ordered the lumber tossed overboard. And it washed up on Iona's shores. It turned out to be just the right kind of lumber, and just the right size of lumber, and just the right amount of lumber that they needed for their building project.

It's about abundance. It's about trusting God to give us what we really need. Not what we might *want*, not what we might *desire*, but what we really need. The rulers of the nations throughout history have not understood this. Desiring things that they had no business having, they've launched wars of conquest. Fearing scarcity in a world filled with God's abundance, they've fought wars for territorial expansion. In 1939, resource-rich Germany launched World War II because they desired even *more* resources. If the Taliban did not desire to impose their rigid and self-righteous form of Islam upon the people and especially the women of Afghanistan, we might not be fighting there. If the United States did not desire the oil resources of the Persian Gulf, they might not have invaded Iraq. The nations fear that there is a scarcity of power and a scarcity of resources, so they fight and kill to get more and more of what their hearts' desire.

Jesus had a better way. He said, “Don’t believe in the economics of scarcity; trust in the God of abundance” (see Matthew 6:25-34). He said, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). Don’t hate them; love them. He said, “Those who live by the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Chairman Moa was right that power comes from the end of a gun; a certain kind of power anyway. But that gun has a tendency to turn on the very person who holds it. And then you become a victim of the very power that you sought to wield.

There’s a Higher Power that Chairman Moa didn’t know about. There’s a Higher Power to which Presidents and Prime Ministers only give lip service. That Higher Power is the power of God, from whom *all* blessings flow. Elijah knew about that power. That’s why he wasn’t afraid – that’s why he told the widow not to be afraid – even in the face of starvation. Abundance flows from that Higher Power. Jesus knew about that power. That’s why he praised another poor widow who gave her last penny to help others who didn’t even have a last penny. He knew that somehow she’d be looked after, because abundance flows from that Higher Power. And we know that. Those of us who survived the worst depression in history and then defeated perhaps the worst tyrant in history; you’ve experienced the

abundance of that Higher Power. Those of us who've come through tough economic times as young parents, or perhaps single parents, but somehow things have worked out; you've experienced the abundance of that Higher Power. Those of us who've left home and family and come to Canada and have struggled and worried for a while because you couldn't find the kind of work here that you've been trained for and maybe you've wondered sometimes where the next meal would come from; things have worked out because you've experienced the abundance of that Higher Power.

God is good. God is generous. And we can thank God, and give out of our abundance as a *way* of thanking God; we can praise God from whom *all* blessings flow.

Don't put your trust in princes. That's what the Bible says (Psalm 146:3). Don't put your trust in princes; they're not the ones from whom the blessings flow. It is *God* who is the Source of abundance. If you put too much trust in princes and prime ministers, they're likely to send you off on some wild adventure where you or a loved one will get killed. In extreme situations that kind of sacrifice is called for. But "happy are those whose help is in the God of

Jacob...the One who keeps faith for ever, who gives justice to the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry” (Psalm 146:5-7). Amen.