

“UPHELD”

I Kings 8-16

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

There’s a drought in the land when Elijah is sent to Zarephath. Zarephath was on the outskirts, in a region that was given to the worship of Baal, which is to say, this was less of a church crowd, and more of a brunch crowd. But as we will see, even in Zarephath, where you’d expect God’s explicit absence, God is nevertheless present to work wonders and provide for those who serve the Lord.

It’s hard, at first, to get past the fact that Elijah has the gall to beg from a beggar. At least, in those times, if a woman’s husband died and the government didn’t take care of her, she was reduced to poverty in short order. With all of his priestly and pastoral experience, we’d expect Elijah to know a brokenhearted widow when he saw one, especially one who was out scavenging for fuel. But what does Elijah do? He says, “How about a cup of water?” Then, as this humble woman turns to fetch him a cup, Elijah adds an additional request, “And a little slice of bread, too, when you get a chance.” Trouble is, the woman had no bread. All she had was a half cup of meal and a tablespoon of oil, and those sticks she was gathering were to fuel her and her young son’s last meal. She said, “I am going home now, sir, to eat this with my son. And then I’m going to lie down and die.”

“Oh, but don’t be afraid,” Elijah replied. “You go and do as you said, but make cakes for the three of us, for the LORD has said the meal won’t be running out, and neither will the oil.” And you know that poor woman did, and by God’s power, the meal did not run out and neither did the oil. There was enough food for the whole household for many days.

A few things strike me about this widow. The first is that she, in her grief and in her pain, can only see her immediate situation. She has no reason to look up—only down at the ground to find twigs for a small fire and meager meal. The second is that she is afraid. She is afraid for her young child, and of the hunger pangs to come. But third, she is nevertheless faithful. And together with Elijah’s faith, they have enough to conduct a smaller, single-household version of the feeding of the five thousand. Abundance somehow came out of what was assumed to be scarcity.

That is the central message I offer from this text today. Where every indication of reality pointed to scarcity, God was at work opening and transforming their imaginations to see an altogether different reality of abundance.

This theological concern has been on my mind a lot as of late. And I mean to be very clear with you the reasons why, because it’s important for us all to know recent developments in our own community regarding scarcity and abundance. I have been tempted to think only in terms of scarcity because, quite frankly, we are not receiving the pledges we need to correspond to the dreams we have for the year 2019. There is a significant enough gap that I have decided it

warrants attention in the Sunday sermon. Our projections have shown the need to reduce our expectations by around 10%. And I am grateful to the staff and leaders of the congregation who have done this hard work over the past couple of weeks.

Today, though, I also want to tell you why I believe this is so. First, yes, we have had some bad luck with a few significant givers moving away for no other reason than their life's circumstances. We've also laid to rest a number of very generous people across the past year. This is a normal part of church every year, but I believe we may see these kinds of losses trend upward over the years, simply because it is a more common habit of older generations to tithe their income to the church.

Second, churches are experiencing along with everyone else significant cultural changes of our time—people are anxious about the future. Many Americans struggle to make ends meet. I'm often reminded of the story of the widow's mite—when Jesus is with his disciples, and he spies a widow coming and giving all she has to live on. After she places it into the Temple treasury, into the coffer, Jesus says, "See, these others give out of their abundance, but she gave all she had to live on. Sometimes we hold up that widow as an example of giving. But I have come to see her more as a victim of powerful institutions. We might compare the Temple to other powers and principalities today, like major corporations, or the extraordinary costs of housing, healthcare, and childcare. Our communities and especially young people and young families aren't really designed to bear these burdens. Many start their careers in debt peonage. The pie gets sliced into smaller pieces. Churches and charities suffer.

Nevertheless, let us not forget that this building, the sanctuary in which we sit, was funded by people living during the Great Depression, who bought bonds and took out second mortgages, because they had great dreams for God's kingdom. We might say we here today are their dreams come true!

Third, and most significantly, our particular church has seen a relatively small number of people with means withholding pledges due to anxiety about our vision, and I believe, specifically, to the formation of our discernment team focusing on questions about LGBTQ inclusion. There are rumors and parking lot conversations—all to be expected. It's part of doing church. But there seems to be some mistaken information circulating that I need to address. One myth is that the discernment team was handpicked to ensure a certain outcome. So, I want to clarify the criteria of selection: 1) active members who aren't already overcommitted, 2) they are loved and widely respected (and not quarrelsome by nature!), and 3) they are representative of the church. Also, I want you to know they are working to help us enact a biblical process of discernment that is taken straight from the New Testament. The work of building consensus comes directly from 1 Cor. 14:

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation

is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

As they get organized, learn one another's stories, and prepare their own hearts and minds, let's give the Discernment Team plenty of time and patience. We expect congregation-wide conversations to commence in early 2019. In the meantime, we should all be praying for them as they seek God's direction for our church.

So yes, we may admit that visions of scarcity attempt to conscript the narrative of our common life. But that can only happen when we forget how powerfully God is already at work among us. Just this fall, when we placed the call on the congregation to support a specific church—First Baptist of New Bern—in the wake of hurricane Florence, guess what happened? The staff and I thought we might collect three, four, maybe five thousand dollars. But you raised twenty-two thousand dollars in short order. So, I know God is at work among us. I know that, when the Spirit moves, we are a generous people. As on the day of Habitat for Humanity, when we overwhelmed the site to help build a new house. So many from across our congregation were there, not with just their finances, but with their bodies, to give back to our community.

We have a team in Puerto Ricco for a second time this year putting roofs on houses in the wake of Hurricane Maria. We've just sent a reconnaissance team to Haiti to make preparations to build a medical clinic there. It's a very remote place. You can't get there from here. But we do! Because this congregation is generous when the Spirit flows through us.

Some of you may remember my invitation to restock the clothes closet earlier this fall. Folks who come to lunch at the Crossroads really need and depend on that closet, and we give out good stuff. Sometimes it gets picked over, but you responded, and within 24 hours, the place was overrun with new clothes. It's so obvious how God is working among us. Even in spite of imaginations that might be given to scarcity, God is working among us, giving rise to abundance even in places we hadn't considered before, and quickly, too.

I want you to think about the fact, too, that people are excited about our church, not just in our congregation, but outside in our community. People have started to stop me at meetings and on sidewalks, saying, "Hey, thank you for what your church is doing. I'm pulling for you."

Over the past few years, we've had over a hundred--I don't know the exact number—but over a hundred people have joined this church with enthusiasm, and they've jumped in head first to our life together. Our young adult Sunday School classes are beginning to swell. The most consistent attenders among us tend to be young people and young families with children, not only because of the free babysitting, but other good things too.

So, I want to say to you, those of you who may be afraid for whatever reason, anxious about culture, political mood, LGBTQ discussions. Don't be afraid, because I don't want you to miss all the fun. In fact, I want all of you to think about who has been dreaming of the kind of church

that doesn't exist, because I know it exists here. I know there are people throughout this city who don't know the qualities, the energy, the prophetic capacity of this place, but they would be here if they knew about it.

We just have to tell them. We have to make sure that they know. And I believe people will come. They will join up with us. They will build us up, and they will help us dream new dreams. Think about how powerful the abundance of God's grace is among us on any given week. Think about all the ways, the multifaceted ways that our congregation acts in this community and beyond.

I think about the parable of the sheep and the goats, the one that inspires the quote 'inasmuch as you do to the least of these, you do unto me'. What's happening in this parable? They are feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, taking care of the sick, visiting those in prisons. We do all those things. And, as Jesus promises us, inasmuch as we do these things, we meet him face to face. Folks, we meet Jesus Christ face to face every week, so why wouldn't we ask others to come along and meet him with us?

It doesn't matter who you are. Come and see. It doesn't matter where you're from. Come and see. It doesn't matter if you're afraid, or if you are full of courage. Come and see what God is doing in this place and in this time. You too will be transformed from the renewing of your minds. And you too will be conscripted into a great adventure, the drama of God's salvation in across human history. Think about that.

I want you to know that I'm not afraid. I am not afraid, and I would have good reason to be. Is my own family not in one of the most vulnerable positions here? But look at my hand. (Don't pause this on the replay and slow it down)... but look at my hand – it's steady. I don't go to sleep at night worrying about the congregation's future and its vitality. I stay awake at night with excitement, because I remember that in the day of my call, I was struck by a lightning bolt!

And every time I think about the capacity of this church's power, I feel an electric current running through me. When I wake up in the middle of the night, it's not about our budget, it's about our future and the vision I have. My eyes open wide in dark quite often lately, because I see what's coming, and I want you to come along and catch this vision with me. Look at the future and see what's possible. A new kind of church that addresses with boldness the challenges of our time, with confidence that God is with us, and that God will provide.

Even when all the evidence is to the contrary, and "reality" reflects scarcity, we know that God's Spirit is abundant and pouring out upon us.

I want to tell you another thing that I believe is important. Now I don't peer at numbers, but I asked Wally, our church administrator, for some information. I said, "Wally, I don't need to know every detail, but I just want you to tell me if this is true. Is it true that the staff of this church does not only give in kind, but gives of their own finances? Is it true that the staff is invested so fully in the future of this church and cares so much about its people that they are in fact tithing one of themselves back to the church by their giving? That is, if you add up what all the staff give, would that pay for one of our positions? And he said... "Yes."

So, the staff is fully invested. We are here with you. We love you, we are walking alongside you to weather this storm together, and we want you to come along with us.

Though our plans have fallen a little short, it doesn't have to stay that way. We have big dreams for 2019, and we are beginning to do things that are original and inspiring. Ministries are being born that will strengthen the ties that bind us together. We are preparing to commit to practices that will draw us closer to each other, ways of cultivating and sustaining friendships – holy friendships across time and space. We are preparing to commit to ways of becoming more steeped in the Word of God, such that we may be made resistant to the lies of our time. All these things are in store for us (and might I add, Advent and Christmas, which is awesome here, is right around the corner.)

So, I know that when we look down at the pieces of paper passing around our committees these days, it's easy to think that a hand is pressing down on us, that the weight of our circumstances is pressing down so much that it's a burden to bear. But that's not true, because what I see is that we're upheld. The Lord not only upholds the orphan, the widow, and those who have been downcast, but the Lord upholds dreamers. *That's us!* It's not up to us, after all, anyway. I'm not excited about what we are doing, necessarily. I'm excited about what God is doing in our midst. God is with us. God will keep us. God will carry us—always and forever.