

Rise Up: From Death to Life

1 Kings 17:7-16
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First Presbyterian Church
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The British economist Umair Haque, in his Harvard Business Review article titled “Is a well-lived life worth anything?” looks at modern society and sees the misuse of our natural resources, an epidemic of obesity and mental-health issues, a debt-driven education crisis, dependence on medications regardless of the “side effects,” a news industry that actually misinforms instead of enlightens, and entertainment that merely titillates.

“In short,” he says, “I see an outcomes gap ... between what our economy produces and what you might call a meaningfully well-lived life” Our vision of the “good life” is based on a vision built in and for the industrial age; it’s about having more.

He challenges us to consider a different vision, one built around the home; spending quality time with family and friends; enjoying healthy, locally sourced foods; and having work or hobbies that feed your soul and contribute to the betterment of society

That’s what he calls prosperity – a society built upon living, doing, achieving, fulfilling, becoming, inspiring, transcending, creating, and accomplishing – all the stuff that matters the most to you.¹

How can find our way in building such a healthy and fulfilling society? Where do we find the hope and confidence to do our part? And just what is our role in creating such a society? These are the three questions we will examine over the next three weeks in this sermon series titled “Rise Up.”

Drawing from the experiences of our spiritual ancestors of the Old Testament, we will follow the Prophet Elijah in discovering the answers to these questions:

No. 1, today, how can we find our way toward health and fulfillment as a society? Next week, what is our source of hope and confidence in doing our part? Where do we find inspiration and guidance in this society? And Week 3, just what is our role in making this a better world for all? Three questions over the next three weeks, beginning today.

In answering the first question about finding our way forward, we journey alongside Elijah as God sends him into the heart of a land suffering from severe drought. It’s been years now and everything has dried up, leaving them unable to grow food to eat or find water to drink.

¹ Umair Haque, "Is a well-lived life worth anything?" *Harvard Business Review*, May 12, 2011.

This is the land of Baal worship. Baal is the false god of ancient Canaan and Phoenicia, where the Israelite settled after their Exodus from Egypt. Well, in the land of false gods, you can imagine that the One True God is not happy. He sees his wayward children being taken in by false gods who promises happiness and prosperity but deliver only struggle and injustice. And God is not happy.

Fast forward 3,000 years to today. Just looking around these days, you can imagine that God is not too pleased with how much struggle and injustice people are facing, all the health issues and financial struggles, families falling apart with little or no outside support or guidance, injustice and self-righteousness having their way, and infighting and divisiveness ruling the day. It's just not what God has in mind for us, for anyone.

It can make us feel like we are in the middle of a decades-long draught when it comes to our sense of overall health, wellbeing, and prosperity as a country. It's a time for transition if not outright reset, a time to return to more faithful ways of living.

In showing this to Elijah – to the Israelites – in pointing them forward, God's promise to Elijah is life where now he sees only death. "Go now to Zarephath ... and live there," God says. Elijah's only hope for life in this drought-stricken world is to listen to God and follow his lead.

Has God ever spoken to you during a moment of true need, a time of loss or suffering or despair? What was that like? Think back. Did you follow God's lead? And if you did, what was that like? Maybe a bit scary and uncertain. Maybe you were tempted to stay where you were and tough it out.

Making a change can be hard, particularly when you don't have a lot going for you at the time, when your world's caving in on you. But that's when God speaks the loudest – or at least when we listen a little more keenly. That's when we're a little more willing to follow God's lead, when things get really hard in life.

And often, like it was with Elijah, we're not so sure about the direction God is pointing us in. Elijah turns to God and God tells him, "I have commanded a widow ... to feed you."

A widow to do what!?! A widow in a time of drought is the last person who could help.

And yet, sometimes God sends to us the last person we'd expect to be able to help. So we say, "Thanks but no thanks; I'm good." Don't do that! If God sends you a rescuer, be open to the help.

Don't make me tell the joke about the guy on the roof, the flood and the helicopter. 'Cause I know you get the point. God can use the most ordinary, unexpected people to do the most wonderful and astounding things – even using you, even using me.

Knowing this, Elijah follows God's lead and finds the widow just where God said she'd be. He calls to her and says, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." Of course, this has got to be the last bit of water she has. Oh, and as she's leaving to get it, he catches her and says, "Bring me a morsel of bread ...," also.

Why would Elijah expect a widow to have water and bread to spare when everyone is dying of hunger and thirst!?! Because God promised him he would live, and that this widow would be his salvation.

Of course, as it is with us sometimes, the widow doesn't believe she has anything to offer, anything that could be of use to God, anything that could make a difference with all the suffering and struggle all around her.

"As the Lord your God lives," she says, "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."

With all hope lost and no worldly reason to believe she could do anything to change what's coming down all around her, the widow hears the following response from Elijah, God's prophet:

"Do not be afraid." Go and do as you have said" – make yourself and your son a meal with what you have – "but first make me a little cake," says Elijah, "and bring it to me.... 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."

So, she went and did as Elijah said, and she and her household ate for many days, with the jar of meal never emptying and the jug of oil never failing. It's a miracle! God is in the miracle business.

God is in the miracle business even and especially in times of greatest need, like ours. And God uses those he sends and those they encounter to work his miracles, to comfort his people, to save the faithful, and ultimately to guide the nations of this world toward his vision of peace and prosperity.

We don't know when or how that peace and prosperity will come. But, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah – the word he speaks to and through us – we know that peace and prosperity will come, is coming to us and to all people.

And in that knowledge, in that sure hope and steadfast belief, we know that God is using us – even you, even me – to help bring it about, to help usher in an era – not of draught amid a misguided world – but rather plenty according to God's blessing, as he guides and equips us, his people, to Rise Up: From Death to Life. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, like the widow of Zarephath, we acknowledge our dependency on you. We are sometimes fooled and led astray into believing that we do not need you, that we are self-sufficient creatures independent of their Creator.

Yet it is in our complete dependence on you that our true meaning and purpose lie. It is in pursuing your vision, your plans, your will for this world that we will find peace from our frantic wanderings.

It is in receiving your free gift of grace that we experience rest from our constant efforts to earn love and esteem.

Thank you for your patience toward us, for your mercy that covers our failures and for your love that moves us to faithfulness and joyful dependence on you.

In our need for you, O God, we lift up prayers on behalf of others, for you are the source of all good gifts, ultimate healing, and spiritual and physical well being. We can't imagine a world without you, a world where your love and provision and guidance are lacking, a world where your voice is silent. So we join our voices now in prayer, praising you, clinging to your promises, drink in your forgiveness, and looking toward your kingdom, as we pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.