
Facing Down Hunger

1 Kings 17:8-24

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 6, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Hunger is a terrifying word. It's physically terrifying to imagine the process of wasting away with hunger. Let me describe it five short sentences. Starvation begins with a few days' gnawing pain before your stomach shrinks. Then there's a longer period where the pain is replaced by widespread physical irritation as your body feeds off its own fat and then its muscle. There follows a shrinking away to skin and bone and terrible tiredness. That tiredness leads to a loss of interest in anything, even food. And finally there's a deadly vulnerability to minor infection that in the end will be what probably kills you. Just the thought of this process makes our shoulders shiver and our stomachs wince.

It's an emotionally troubling thing to imagine being in the presence of real hunger. We've all heard stories of thirsty sailors cast adrift on flimsy life rafts facing desperate choices about how to stay alive. And it's not hard to project from those nightmares a more general terror of being in proximity to someone who's half-crazed, who might want what you have, who might stop at nothing to get it.

And as well as being physically and emotionally terrifying, it's psychologically humiliating to live as we do in a culture soaked in the myth of progress, and yet to know that nonetheless 5 million children die of hunger in the world each year. It's sobering to admit that in the United States, where we can be tempted to speak of hunger as another nation's problem, one household in six struggles to put food on the table.

So hunger is physically terrifying, emotionally troubling, and psychologically sobering.

Why is there so much hunger? Is it because the world has too many people and not enough food? Quite simply, no. The world produces enough food to feed everyone one-and-a-half times over. The causes of hunger vary, but they usually include one of the three Ws.

W number one is war. War disrupts food production, diverts investment from agriculture to armaments, makes food supplies a focus of conflict, displaces populations, and creates refugees.

W number two is waste. Waste refers to the corruption that absorbs around a quarter of the wealth of some of the world's poorest countries. But waste also recognizes that nearly half of the food ready for harvest in the United States each year never gets eaten, and that huge transfers of food from wealthier nations to poor countries in times of famine or crisis sometimes undermine local agriculture and destroy the local economy. And waste names the reality that many people in stronger economies, who don't necessarily feel hungry, are still eating foods that leave them undernourished.

W number three is world trade. Much of the most fertile land in developing countries is used to grow products for rich world markets that yield no benefit for local consumers. Global ownership of grain and seed production remains in a very small number of hands, and the pattern of trade agreements and food subsidies prevents the flourishing of local food production in much of the developing world.

Notice none of these Ws is weather. Famine isn't primarily about drought. If you're living in vulnerable circumstances in a developing country which is in the grip of war, waste, and the imbalances of world trade, you have very little margin for error when it comes to keeping hunger at a safe distance. You can die of hunger without regard to the weather. Thousands do every day.

Put in this context, the First Book of Kings is not so strange and foreign a book as it may appear. The land of Israel is a dry land, where famine is always a possibility. But it's also a land flowing with milk and honey, where the destructive damage of war, the misuse of power, and the economic realities on the ground shape people's destinies more than simply the weather. It's not so different from many developing nations today.

I want now to look at physical, emotional and psychological way the prophet Elijah faces the reality of hunger in his encounter with the widow of Zarephath. I'm going to focus on two moments that leap out of this story as strange and jarring and provocative. One comes near the beginning and the other comes near the end.

Elijah obeys God's instruction to go to Sidon, the territory north of Israel. Then he meets a widow on the edge of the town of Zarephath. This should ring a bell, because a meeting between a man and a woman on the edge of town is a tell-tale sign in the Old Testament that God is going to do something important. And then Elijah says something really surprising. "Bring me a morsel of bread." Isn't that strange? Isn't it an insult to ask a hungry widow for food? After all, she's just about to cook her last-ever meal.

So why does he do it? Because it respects her dignity and it calls out her faith. Elijah respects her dignity because he begins by assuming the widow is the agent of her own salvation in relation to hunger. He doesn't try to buy her off with a handout. When we see TV pictures of starving people, we easily think, "Why doesn't someone just give them lots of food?" But that's not a solution. They'll just be hungry again tomorrow. Any long-term solution has to come from the people themselves, and eventually it has to be based on how they can generate their own income by doing things for others. Even in a desperate situation, Elijah's request recognizes this. He proposes a plan that will benefit both the widow and himself.

But saying "Bring me a morsel of bread" is also a call to faith. Faith means living in the world God promises until the promise comes true. That makes people of faith look strange to everyone else, because everyone else isn't living in the world God promises. Elijah is asking the widow to live in a very different world from the one in front of her. The woman knows that feeding Elijah will ask everything of her that she's got – her last handful of meal and drop of oil. Here she faces the moment of truth.

If you've so little left that there's not even enough for yourself, will you cling to it all the tighter – or make it feed another and thus entrust it to God? You might think that generosity is worth a try in these desperate circumstances. After all, she's going to die either way. But how many of us would take a risk on generosity, even as a last resort? How many of us ever do?

Step back from the story a moment. What if that meal and oil represents the last few days or years of your life? Would you take a risk giving those last few days or years to others, and thus to God, or would you rather cling onto them for all you're worth, making them stretch as long as you can, despite knowing deep down they'll run out soon enough? Would you take a risk on generosity, even as a last resort?

Well, the widow does give him the morsel of bread. God chooses to ask something more of her at just the time when she's worn out. God does just the same to us. It's when we've got nothing left that God asks us for something more. That's when God finds out who we really are and we find out who God really is. In the defining moment of her life, when she's at her lowest and most self-absorbed, the widow faces the challenge of recognizing God in the stranger who is asking something of her.

And great is the widow's reward. "The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail," until the rains came and the famine was over. When the widow saw her destiny in the stranger, God gave her abundance even amid hunger.

Then let's look at the other curious moment in this story. The widow's son dies. And she tears into Elijah, expressing all her grief and her anger and her despair. "What have you against me?" she says. Elijah's response is similar to the first conversation. He asks something more of her, a second time. Elijah says, "Give me your son." Again, does she part with her dead or dying son, trusting this strange foreign man, or does she cling to her son in her ocean of agony? How many of us would rather be left alone clinging to our grief and anger and despair rather than ever allow someone to come close to us and be in it with us? But, in spite of herself, the widow gives Elijah her son. Elijah cries out his own lament and grief to God. He takes the widow's despair and makes it his own, saying, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"

And here's the most remarkable part of the story. Elijah "stretched himself upon the child three times." A few minutes from the end of their defeat to Duke in this year's Final Four, West Virginia's star player Da'Sean Butler writhed around the floor screaming in pain. His usually taciturn coach Bob Huggins leant over him and placed his own face no more than an inch or two from the player's agonized tongue and despairing eyes for what seemed like forever but must have been at least 30 seconds. The intimacy of these two men was startling and the poignancy of the scene was mesmerizing. That's what Elijah did over this widow's son. He went flat out for him three times. Remember a dead body was thought to be unclean. Elijah is not made unclean by

death. Death is made clean by the faith of Elijah. He laid his life down for the boy. And the boy is raised from death.

Here are the two surprising things about this story. Number one: God doesn't solve our problems for us. He gives us abundance when we give away our last morsel. Number two: God doesn't hide his face from our grief. He goes flat out for us, and faces down our death with his intimate touch.

What we see in Elijah is what we later come to see fully in Jesus. God meets our desperation face to face. God asks something more of us when we feel we have nothing to give. God enters into our suffering and faces it down with us. God goes flat out for us and restores us to life. What we have in this story of Elijah is a prefiguration of the whole of Jesus' story.

And that brings us back to hunger. How should Christians in Durham, North Carolina think about world hunger? Well, like anything else, we should study the issue, and learn about war, waste, and world trade. But we should also study the gospel, and see how God works. Then we come face to face with the issue the way God does.

More precisely, we can learn from the two surprising parts of this story. Here's the first Elijah meets a woman who's desperate, and he asks more of her. This is a lesson for our head. We can't divide the world into the poor, who have the need, and the rich, who have the answers. Hunger isn't simply about lack of food. Addressing world hunger means setting to work on all the factors that contribute to a person facing starvation, and always working so that the person themselves is empowered to find their own solution, often in partnership with many other such people around the world. You can't solve other people's problems. The best you can do is to help them solve their own. On a personal level, when you yourself are desperate, don't be surprised if that's the moment when God asks a little bit more of you. It feels unjust and unfeeling and unfair, but it's the way God respects your humanity and begins to set you on your feet again.

And here's the second surprising thing. Elijah stretches out and lies face down on the boy three times. Elijah's approach to the widow's suffering is physical and intimate and all-consuming. This is a lesson for our heart. Having a heart doesn't mean shedding sentimental tears at the end of the movie. Having a heart means sharing the widow's cry of grief and anger and despair and laying down one's life because you believe God hears your prayers when you put yourself in another's place, and pleading with God to visit the poor in their affliction. If you want to address global hunger, you can't just get the head right and understand the causes and work out the right strategies. You've got to get the heart and soul right and physically and intimately put your body wherever God needs it to be to pray and strive for change.

In a moment you nine young people in front of me are going to be confirmed in the faith expressed for you at your baptism. And this confirmation is a confirmation of the mission on which you were each sent at your baptism. And if you're going to get that mission right you'll do well to learn the ways of God in this story of Elijah. Write on your hearts the two ways to embark on mission. Come face to face with the realities of need and suffering in their complexity and their humanity. And go flat out with your body and soul to give your whole life in an enacted prayer for change. That's Elijah's confirmation commission to you. Come face to face. And go flat out. And together, in the power of the Holy Spirit, you'll face down the most terrifying horrors in the world.