

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

GOD IS ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR

I Kings 17:8-16; 17-24 June 6, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Our text for today is in the midst of this great story about the prophet Elijah and his confrontation with King Ahab. Ahab was king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He married Jezebel, daughter of the King of Tyre. Jezebel was a follower of the Canaanite God Baal. Of course this marriage flew in the face of the commandment, "You will have no other gods before me." That is one of the basic of the list of 10 commandments. Ahab built a temple for Jezebel to this Canaanite god in Samaria. The bible tells us that "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings before him." The prophet Elijah confronts King Ahab. He tells Ahab that God will send a drought on Israel. There will be no rain or even dew until Israel turns back to the Lord. That does not go well with Jezebel and Ahab, so for his prophetic words, Elijah is forced to flee.

God sends Elijah to the Wadi Cherith, where there is water and God sends ravens to bring Elijah bread and meat in the morning and in the evening. That goes well until the wadi dries up – remember, God sends rain on the just and the unjust! God then sends Elijah to Zerephath telling him that he has commanded a widow there to feed him. The drought lasts three years. We will come back to this text in a moment.

Elijah is probably best remembered for the contest at Mt. Carmel. That contest follows our text for today Ahab calls all the prophets – including the prophets of Baal- to Mt. Carmel. Ahab wants to demonstrate the power of Baal. One of the attributes of Baal was that Baal gave rain to nurture the crops. Elijah goes to Mt. Carmel. He is the only prophet of the Lord of Israel. Ahab has brought 450 prophets of Baal. There will be this contest. Elijah asks the people gathered there for this contest how long they will limp along with two different opinions – the choice to serve Baal or the Lord God of Israel. The contest begins. There will be a sacrifice offered and the God who answers with fire will be God. The prophets of Baal go first. They put their pieces of meat on the altar and begin to pray to Baal to send fire to consume the offering. They pray from morning until night – nothing happens. Elijah mocks them, "Call louder, maybe your god is on a journey, or asleep." There is no answer. Elijah takes the 12 stones of the altar of the Lord that had been torn down. He rebuilds the altar. He puts wood and the sacrifice on the altar. He then drenches the altar and sacrifice with water. Then Elijah calls on the Lord God of Israel and fire comes down and consumes the offering. The rain comes. Elijah is not elected secretary of state. He has to flee for his life once again.

Stuck in this story of Elijah's confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel and the prophets of Baal is our text for today. The drought dries up the Wadi Cherith. God sends Elijah to Zarephath located in Sidon. God tells Elijah that he has commanded a widow there to feed him. I wonder how Elijah interprets that. "Sure God, you're sending me to this foreign land, I am a stranger (alien) and this widow is supposed to take care of me."

The words widow, the orphan, the stranger (sometimes called alien) - these people – or these categories appear many times in scripture. These people are grouped together in one voiceless class of people. Indeed, widows, orphans, and aliens were the poorest of the poor in Elijah's day. Being a widow also meant her child was considered an orphan. What this group had in common was they could not count on protection offered by a male adult in the family. They were poor. Life was miserable. When Elijah meets this

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widow at the gate of the city, she is gathering sticks – not a sign of wealth and financial security. She has nothing. Elijah asks her for water, which she goes to get. He also asks for bread. The widow tells Elijah of her situation. “I have only a handful of meal and a little oil in a jar. I have gathered these sticks to cook our last meal so that we may eat it and die.” Elijah promises her that the meal and the oil would not run out until God sends rain. And it was so. The widow thinks her son is dead. The scripture does not say he is dead. Elijah revives him. The woman is overwhelmed with this miracle from Elijah – and she should be. Her only hope for the future is for her son to grow up and be able to take care of her in her old age. It is an amazing story.

God is on the side of the poor and wants life for them. Sometimes the laws we make to help the poor simply keep them in poverty. Our city tax is 10%. It is to help us run the city – schools, parks, city services. That 10% takes away from the poor what little they have. Alabama is one of only 2 states that charges tax on food at the grocery store. There is much in the story of the Christian faith, in our Bible that tells us to stand with the poor, to be on their side.

Another lesson in our text for today is this trust of Elijah in God. Elijah is in a tough spot. Yet he believes he must speak the word of truth to King Ahab.

Our text of God using the widow to take care of him, caused Elijah to be firm in his trust in God. Think of your own life today. I think of mine. Sometimes, I have been the voiceless widow. Sometimes we are orphans. And we are the homeless stranger. And in our lives, in God’s name, we like the widow bring water, oil and bread for the lost, the oppressed, the poor, the forgotten. The joy of their gratitude should not surprise us. We have felt the same way when God has reached out to us in our times of need. It is one of the ways we have learned to trust in God.