

Life and Power

2nd Weekend of Kingdomtide – June 17/18, 2006

Sermon Background Study

1 Kings 17:8-16; 18:36-40 (NRSV)

[Though Elijah promises a deadly drought to King Ahab, God, working through Elijah, brings life to a widow.]

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “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.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.” ¹⁴For 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.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

[Elijah’s confrontation with the priests of Baal reaches its climax. Baal, the chief Canaanite god, is a no-show – for there is no Baal.]

³⁶At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding.” ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” ³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.” ⁴⁰Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

Who is the giver of life? This is the question that Elijah puts to Ahab. The answer is demonstrated for all in a contest on Mt. Carmel. But whom or what does our world embrace as the source of life?

A common misconception is that the ancient Israelites were always monotheistic. However, when God tells them that they are to have no other gods than YHWH (Exodus 20), it is a literal prohibition against worshiping the other assorted gods that the Israelites believed existed. During the days of Abraham and Moses and even David, the Israelites believed that the LORD God was the biggest and best god on the block, but not the only god.

Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that much of the Old Testament is taken up with confrontations and contests between YHWH and his rivals. For example, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is actually a contest between YHWH and an Egyptian deity. When the Ark of the Covenant is captured by the Philistines, it sets up a contest between YHWH and the Philistine deity, Dagon. Not surprisingly, God wins every time. There are no other gods!

With the advent of the prophet Elijah in the ninth-century BC, the Israelites came to the growing recognition that not only was YHWH the best god on the block, he was the only God! The Israelites would become fiercely monotheistic, setting them apart from all the peoples around them. The Jews would proclaim that there was only one God and that this one God had chosen them to be his people.

Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel

The book of Kings (1 and 2 Kings are a single literary work) tells the story of the twelve tribes’ transition from the united kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon to two sister kingdoms that are eventually overrun by conquerors. (see the page two textbox)

In 869BC, Ahab ascended to the throne of Israel, the northern kingdom. Though most of the kings before and after Ahab “did evil” in God’s sight, Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30).

Ahab married Jezebel, a foreigner, and turned to the worship of Baal, the supreme god of the Canaanites. It is here that we meet the prophet Elijah, who intervened in the religious crisis brought on by Ahab and Jezebel. The story of Elijah’s confrontation with Jezebel and with the priests of Baal is one of the great biblical narratives. Later, Elijah does not die but, instead, is taken to heaven in a whirlwind, riding a chariot of fire. Elijah’s prophetic successor was Elisha, whose ministry to the kingdom of Israel lasted nearly fifty years, to 800BC or so.

YHWH, the giver of life

When Elijah arrives on the scene in 1 Kings 17, he heads immediately for King Ahab of the northern kingdom, Israel. The writer of Kings prepares us for what is coming. We are told that though the kings had been a bad lot, Ahab was the worst, for he served and worshiped the Canaanite god, Baal.

The first challenge that Elijah lays down before Ahab sets the stage for all that follows. In the arid regions of Palestine, rain was scarce and life-giving. Baal was worshiped as the bringer of rain. Thus, when Elijah promises the Baal-worshipping Ahab a drought, he is saying that Baal is a fraud, that Baal cannot bring rain. Baal cannot give life. Instead, life is YHWH's alone to give and to take away.

The stories that follow are all stories of the LORD God's life-giving power. God tells Elijah to flee from Ahab and hide in a ravine. God has ordered ravens¹ to feed him there. Then, God sends Elijah to see a widow, whom God will also instruct to feed Elijah.

A Kingdom Divided

Solomon took the kingdom of Israel to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. He expanded the borders of Israel. But he also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction. Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the LORD God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, the people's abandonment of the covenant between God and his people could lead only to a bad end.

The united kingdom had always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death and some unwise decisions by his son and successor, Rehoboam, Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two. The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (see 1 Kings 11 for all this).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God! Most of the kings got a failing grade - they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Doing evil in God's sight meant that the king had led the people away from YHWH to the worship of other gods. Only a few, like Hezekiah, did what was right in God's sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2), leading the people back to the worship of the one true God.

Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586BC.

However, when Elijah arrives, the widow can't feed herself and her son, much less Elijah. But then, in a surprising display of God's life-giving power, the widow's jar of flour and bottle of oil are filled and would not run out. Then, just in case we've missed the point, the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Elijah prays over the boy and God restores him to life. It is all about life, life, and more life.

The climactic confrontation

When God tells Elijah to return to Ahab, Elijah directly challenges the priests of Baal to a contest. It would be YHWH v. Baal. But the contest is not really a contest at all. In one of the most dramatically told stories in Scripture, Baal is a complete no-show, being no more than a figment of the Canaanite spiritual imagination.

On that day, in a spectacular display of God's power and presence, Elijah showed all those who had ears to hear and eyes to see that the LORD God was not merely the best god on the block, the LORD was the only God, the creator and ruler of all that was, is, or will be.

And after God's victory? Rain, in huge rushing torrents. Yes, it is YHWH and only YHWH who gives life.

Knowing the Life-Giver

These are ancient stories, but it isn't very hard to get inside them, to make these stories our own. We still live in a world in which many people deny that the LORD God is the Life-Giver. Some may simply never give it much thought. Others may have looked for life in other gods. Still others have made themselves comfortable with the notion that life is simply the result of time and random mutation acting on a primordial soup.

But can we really understand life without knowing the Life-Giver? Can we find the meaning of life if we look any place other than the God-Who-Is? We'll see next week that, like his mentor, Elisha's ministry was a ministry of life. Then, as now, truly embracing life means embracing the God who gives it.

¹We always have to be ready for and open to God's surprises. Here, God uses ravens, unclean animals (Leviticus 11:15), to give life to Elijah. There simply is no box big enough to contain God. How has God surprised you in the last week?

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

June 18 - June 24

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 2 Kings 1-4; Psalm 86 Elisha succeeds Elijah and embarks on his own ministry of life.</p>	<p>Day 2 2 Kings 5-7; Psalm 87 The story of Naaman's healing; the king of Aram is turned back</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Kings 8-11; Psalm 88 Jezebel finally meets her end; the descendents of Ahab are killed</p>	<p>Day 4 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Kings 12-14; Psalm 89:1-18 The temple is restored; the death of Elisha</p>	<p>Day 6 2 Kings 15-18; Psalm 89:19-52 The long litany of bad kings continues; Assyria overruns the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BC - these are the ten lost tribes!</p>
<p>Day 7 2 Kings 19-21; Psalm 90 King Hezekiah of Judah does what is right in the Lord's sight! As a result, he is able to hold off Assyria and avoid being overrun. We also meet the prophet Isaiah.</p>	

Sermon Notes

June Book Recommendation

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

John Wesley's theological brilliance can be seen in his unerring commitment to the "both/ands" of the Christian faith. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. We are saved AND we are being saved. These and many other Christian claims are not choices, they are truths that we must sustain even if we don't fully grasp the mystery. This book is a slender introduction to the Wesley brothers' proclamations of the Good News. You will be introduced to the writings of John and to the theology of Charles' hymns. You will see how the Wesley brothers sought to hold on to the vital tension between faith and works, Word and Spirit, the personal and the social, and more.

The book is well-organized into four sections of two chapters each. Questions for reflection and discussion are provided at the end of each chapter, making this book very suitable for a Sunday School class or other small group.

***Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott Engle recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I once read a column by the best-selling novelist, Anna Quindlen, in which she reflected on the single-most important piece of advice she could give her children. She said she'd tell her kids to grab life with both hands - life, life, and more life - for there just wasn't enough to go around. I think I know what she meant. It is what we all seek. To live full, meaningful, and joyful lives. What we don't much about is how. Or better, we know a lot about how but we don't actually do it. Why do you think so many people find it so hard to live full, meaningful, and joyful lives? What gets in our way? Why do we let it get in the way? What has characterized people you've known who seem to embrace life and live it robustly?

Elijah sought to show Ahab and all the people of Israel that the LORD God is the source and giver of life. In this, Elijah prepares us for the life-giving ministry of Jesus. Elijah is miraculously fed by the ravens and then the widow, but Jesus is able to feed multitudes himself. Elijah has to appeal to God to bring the widow's son back to life. But in a parallel episode, Jesus has the power to raise a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). Elijah never dies but is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Jesus, however, defeats death and is resurrected to new life, as he said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). As we saw last week, Paul writes that we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ (Colossians 3:14) - raised to be new life. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). What does all this tell you about our own search for life? Where will we find it? What is the shape of the life given us by the Life-Giver? Why do you think that so many people look for life everywhere but in Jesus Christ? How might we help others to find new life in Christ?