

Today, we begin a new sermon series entitled, *A Tale of Two Prophets*, exploring the lives and ministries of two Old Testament prophets: Elijah and Elisha. As I learned in seminary, “j” comes before “s,” so Elijah before Elisha. Their stories are more than historical accounts; they are windows into the heart of a living God. Through them, we see profound glimpses of how God interacts with humanity, balancing justice with mercy. Today’s biblical story begins at a time when it’s been a long time since one of God’s mouthpieces, a prophet, has appeared. Generations upon generations. Think about that for a moment. If your great-great-great-great grandparents were the last to share their faith and no one had heard one peep from God, wouldn’t it be hard for you to believe God was alive? But remember that generations before now the Israelites had complained that they wanted an earthly king (1 Sam. 8:5) and rejected their true king, the God of heaven and earth?! They argued that they wanted a king who could lead them in battle and give them a sense of national identity, security, and unity. Their request reflected a lack of faith and trust in their covenant relationship with the Lord. Yet, God granted their request and gave them an earthly king. The first king of Israel was Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. Some kings were better than others but the one reigning when Elijah pops onto the scene is the worst of all. Elijah’s story unfolds in a time of deep crisis for Israel, a nation that has continued to lose its way. The books of 1st and 2nd Kings, originally one unified narrative, tell the story of the rise and tragic fall of Israel and Judah's kings after the reign of David. Though David united the twelve tribes into a kingdom and received God's promise that his lineage would bring forth a messianic king, the rulers who followed him

strayed far from the covenant and after King Solomon, David's son, died, the tribes of Israel are now in two parts: the Northern kingdom, Israel, where ten of the tribes are located, and the Southern kingdom, Judah, where two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) are located. Therefore, there was now a king of Israel and a king of Judah. The unfaithfulness of both kingdoms plunged the nation into idolatry, injustice, and eventual ruin.

Elijah appears all of a sudden- completely out of the blue- during the reign of Ahab, the king of Israel. There were six kings between Saul and Ahab. Ahab ruled over Israel for 22 years and was infamous for his wickedness. As a matter of fact, we're told in scripture that *Ahab, son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him* (1 Kings 16:30). And that *Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him* (1 Kings 16:33b). Whoa. It sounds like Ahab really ticked off God! But also pulling the strings was Ahab's famous Canaanite wife, Jezebel. Ever heard of her or called someone a Jezebel? Think Game of Thrones. She was a princess from Sidon whose father worshiped Baal, the Canaanite storm god. Ahab may have been the head of the household, but Jezebel was the neck, and she influenced Ahab greatly. Together they instituted the worship of Baal as a national religion. This wasn't just spiritual infidelity; it was a direct assault on the identity of Israel as God's chosen people. The northern kingdom, already fractured by rebellion and idolatry, was spiraling further into chaos, marked by corruption, oppression, and a rejection of God's covenant.

Elijah, whose name means “Yahweh is my God,” was a prophet in the truest sense of the word- a "covenant watchdog," raised by God to call out idolatry and injustice, to remind Israel of its calling to be a light to the nations. He lived a wild, untamed life in the wilderness, embodying the spirit of God's truth in the face of overwhelming opposition. Make no mistake, Elijah wasn't perfect, but he was faithful to God and to his mission, which was to confront the powers that be, speak truth to kings like Ahab, and call the people back to worship the one true God. Elijah's ministry was marked by dramatic acts of power that revealed God's presence in undeniable ways. Yet, his mission was also deeply personal, as we see in this morning's story. Here, in a quiet act of compassion and provision, Elijah reflects the heart of God, who cares for the vulnerable and brings hope out of despair. As we turn to this text, we see that Elijah's story is more than a record of miracles or confrontations. It is the story of a God who intervenes in history, calling God's people back to God's self. It reminds us that even in times of national and personal despair, God's presence is near, and God's promises endure. Before we turn to God's word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

The first thing we're told about Elijah is that he is from Tishbe in Gilead. The second thing we're told is that Elijah is in King Ahab's court confronting him with the pronouncement of a drought or famine. “The proclamation of a drought is seen by many as direct confrontation to the false gods by the God of Israel. A drought, you see, is a challenge to Baal, a direct blow to Baal's role as a vegetation and rain god. Who is this Elijah? There is no other introduction or background info on Elijah. “Who he is as a person does not matter; what matters is that he is a man

of God, someone taken hold of by God” (John Goldingay, *1 and 2 Kings for Everyone*). Elijah simply barges into King Ahab’s court. I mean, how did he get in there to be face-to-face with the king? Did he slip past the guards or make an appointment through his cousin who worked for the king? Did Ahab even know who he was? So many questions that will remain unanswered, so let’s focus on what we do know from the text and that’s what Elijah says first to King Ahab. He says, *As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand...*(v. 1b). In stating this, what Elijah is saying to Ahab is the God of Israel is alive and well and sees Ahab and his choice to worship Baal, even building an altar in Samaria and erecting a sacred pole for Baal. This is probably what sent God over the edge, hence Elijah’s appearance on the scene. Elijah makes it crystal clear that he is standing there as a believer and messenger of God. Therefore, this pronouncement is from the living God of Israel, not from Elijah.

After the pronouncement was made, we aren’t told of Ahab’s reaction. All we know is that God told Elijah to go and hide east of the Jordan by the Cherith wadi or brook and that the ravens would feed him. And Elijah did exactly as the Lord commanded him, and God kept his word. The ravens supplied bread and meat both morning and night and the wadi gave him water. But one day, the water dried up because there was no rain. And God told Elijah to travel to Judah, to Zarephath in Sidon- which is 50-60 miles away, and live there. God also told him that there was a widow there who God had commanded to feed Elijah. Ok...let’s pause for a moment. Sidon is where Jezebel is from. Why there in foreign territory? Maybe there so that Ahab and Jezebel and their

soldiers won't think to look there for him, especially not at a widow's home?

During a national calamity, a disenfranchised prophet comes upon a foreign, nameless widow in Zarephath as she is picking up sticks. Widows in biblical times were and still can be among the most vulnerable in society, especially in times of famine. And for a widow, each child means another mouth to feed. Widows were completely disenfranchised when they lost their husbands, and many were reduced to homelessness and begging. This widow was already in a tenuous economic position and then the drought. Knowing all of this, Elijah, a stranger to her, approaches this widow, which is also a no-no, and asks her for, no demands, a drink and then he has the audacity to ask her for some bread as well. "Trust- at times- can look like audacity" (Sara M. Koenig, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Did you notice though that it isn't Elijah who mentions God in their encounter, it's the nameless widow? In her response back to what appears Elijah's rude request, the widow says, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful or meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; and now, I'm gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die "(v. 12). I mean the prospect of being fed by a widow in the midst of a drought is dismal indeed. But Elijah tells the widow not to be afraid and to go and do as he asked. He then tells her that God will see to it that she has enough flour and oil until it rains again. The nameless widow then went and filled the prophet's request, and they ate for many days. The text doesn't say they were full, but they ate, and it was enough until it rained again. The power of the same God many

centuries later will feed five thousand people according to the Word of his Son our Lord. Even in the middle of famine and hard times, the God of Israel provides and sustains over and against the silence and inactivity of the god, Baal. "It is much easier to talk about trust-confidence in God's goodness and provision in the face of despair and doubt- than it is to live it" (Koenig). Yet, over and over again, God sends God's servants and prophets to help us remember who and whose we are and who we are to worship and worship alone and how we are to treat one another, especially the least of these.

Tomorrow we remember a modern-day prophet, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who, just like Elijah, was not perfect but was raised by God to call out idolatry and injustice, to remind God's people of our calling to be a light to the nations. King wrote in his infamous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages ... as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled." King continues, "Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in

Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community no alternative. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed. We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love...Amos an extremist for justice...Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel."

Just as Elijah walked in obedience to the call of God so must we as followers of Jesus do likewise. During this series, may we reflect on our own faith journeys and discover where we are extremists when it comes to following God through Jesus Christ. For faith and obedience lead to God's provision...always...more than enough. And as people of faith, "we may very well find ourselves called out by God to stand before kings, so to speak, to tell truth to power not because we are a 'peace-and-justice' church or an 'inclusive' church or a 'Bible-believing' church or whatever may be the code words for the moment, but because of the Lord, the god of Israel before whom you stand" (Fleming Rutledge, *The Little Church in the Wilderness*). After all, this is all part of faith- the difficult and joy-filled part- the all that easy and all that hard part- the mysterious and few answers part- the daily miracles and disappointments part- the doubt yet trusting God again and again and again part. God does as God promises. God will do it! Will we trust and obey? Do we believe? Amen.