

Well, it's been a while since the excitement of Elijah's being taken up into a chariot in a whirlwind, leaving his mentee, Elisha, who asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit, behind. Elisha finishes the work assigned to Elijah (1 Kings 19:15-17) and anoints Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu as king of Israel. Although Elisha picks up the mantle from Elijah, claiming his inheritance as one of the great prophets of the Old Testament and Elijah's successor (2 Kings 2:5), subsequent passages show Elisha operating in a style that is quite different from his mentor's. Unlike the solitary figure of Elijah, Elisha works closely with several prophetic 'companies'" (*FOW*, Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer). In other words, Elijah helped or went to people in his immediate vicinity, whereas Elisha helped everyone from everywhere- reminiscent of Jesus, who feeds spiritually and literally. When we first hear of Elisha in 1 Kings (19), he is farming in the field. Interestingly Elisha is connected with miracles mostly concerned with food, as we will see today. Also it's fascinating that Elijah had 7 miraculous acts whereas Elisha had 14 miraculous acts, perhaps the double portion Elisha asked for? Both of these prophets- Elijah and Elisha- "J" before "S"- while unique in their approach- played the same role and ultimately were both unsuccessful in turning Israel back from renouncing their belief in and covenant with Yahweh. Today's scripture reading contains a grouping of 5 miraculous acts performed by Elisha through the power of God. We're only going to look at three of them. A reminder: God is the one with authority, the ultimate King, whose power shows up through the agency of others, including Elisha. I invite you to listen for patterns in these miracle stories. Before we turn to God's word for us this day, first let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

*“Why worry about the loaves and fishes?”* Mary Oliver once wrote. *“Why worry about the loaves and fishes? If you say the right words, the wine expands. If you say them with love and the felt necessity of that love, the fish explode into many. Imagine him, speaking, and don’t worry about what is reality, or what is plain, or what is mysterious. If you were there, it was all those things. If you can imagine it, it is all those things. Eat, drink, be happy. Accept the miracle. Accept, too, each spoken word spoken with love* (*“Logos,”* Mary Oliver, *Devotions*). One phrase in particular stands out to me in Oliver’s poem. **Accept the miracle.** That’s a loaded line right there. I don’t know about you, but it isn’t always easy to accept the miracle. Do you believe that God CAN perform miracles? We started off these sermon series with Elijah and some miracles and in today’s text, there are five of them- this time with Elisha and God, though we only read three. In each one of these miracle stories, there is a **pattern of need, faith, and miracle.** Let’s quickly look at each one. First one tells of a widow in dire need. Her husband is said to have been in the COP- the Company of Prophets. More than likely the COP wasn’t that large of a group, as I’m guessing prophecy wasn’t a popular vocation. I imagine prophecy to be a lonely and isolating ministry, hence the reason- maybe- for the COP? As we know with widows, they are among the most vulnerable in society, and add children to that mix and you know they are the least of these. All we are told is that this widow has debt that she cannot pay and now the time has come to settle that debt. She is afraid that her children will be sold into slavery. The law allowed for creditors to collect what was owed and to sell children into slavery if needed. To say this unnamed widow is desperate would be an

understatement. This widow turns to Elisha because she believes that he is a man of God. She knows because her husband was a member of the COP- Company of Prophets. In Jewish tradition, this widow's husband is believed to be Obadiah. We learn about Obadiah in 1 Kings 18:3-4. Elijah was stating to God that there were no other prophets around, but we're told that Obadiah, who was over King Ahab's household, was a man of God, thus a prophet. When Jezebel began killing off the prophets of Israel, Obadiah, takes 100 of them and hides them in two caves, leaving them with bread and water. While we don't know if this is Obadiah's widow, this theory makes sense because this widow knows Elisha. It's either her faith and/or one of these- "Hey, you've got to help us. My late husband helped you. You help us." So Elisha tells her to gather what's in her house. All she has is one jar of oil. Now wait a minute. Wasn't there another oil miracle with Elijah? Yes, but this one is different. What I'm struck by here are the involvement of the neighbors. Elisha tells this widow to get up and go to her neighbors and ask to borrow their vessels or jars, too, and she and her children got to collecting. Can you imagine how humiliating this could be? How many of us would swallow our pride enough to let our neighbors know our business and then allow them to help us? Well, the widow and her children come back and begin to fill the vessels they've collected from neighbors and before they know it, there is more than enough oil to pay off their debts and to live off of. This community comes together for this widow and her children. They had what they needed and gave to meet another's needs. Now...that's the gospel!

The second miracle story tells of Elisha's return to Gilgal, where there is a famine taking place. Hanging out with his community, the COP, Elisha asks one of the servants to make some stew for them. One of the servants intended on gathering herbs but instead he collected a wild vine and threw it in the pot. This reminds me of when I was a camp counselor, and it was raining, and we were hungry. We had to build a fire in order to eat, so I asked the campers to go find some dry leaves. Unbeknownst to me, someone picked poison ivy and threw it into the fire. I'm grateful it didn't make it into our food; however, I inhaled the smoke and let's just say that I was unrecognizable. After several cortisone shots, I was fine. But back to the stew. When it was served, they cried out, "O man of God, there is death in the pot!" In other words, are you trying to kill us with this poison? Remember there's a famine going on, so they don't have much food, hence the stone soup, I mean, stew. Notice that they don't suggest throwing the contaminated stew out. Because that would be wasteful, but isn't it inedible? Elisha asked for some plain ole flour and threw it in the pot and said, "Serve the people and let them eat." Miraculously, there was nothing harmful anymore in the stew. And in the third miracle story the famine continues but notice the name of the place where the man, who brought his first fruits, came from: Baal-shalishah. Isn't it ironic that he's from a place that obviously is affiliated with Baal, yet he brings food-his first fruits-to the man of God, Elisha: **twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain**. He chooses to bring his offering to the God of Israel through Elisha, not to Baal, the god of fertility and provision. The first fruits acknowledged that the land and its produce belonged first to God. What's interesting is that in

Leviticus (23:30), we're told that food from the first fruits was a "holy offering" and needed to go to the priest who then offered it to God. Yet, here, this man gives it to the prophet Elisha, who is not a priest. Elisha tells this man from Baal country, "give it to the people and let them eat" (v. 42). But he asks, "How can I set this before 100 people" (v. 43)? I would've asked the same question. Elisha repeated himself and added... "For thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left'" (v. 43). They ate and had leftovers. Where else have we heard a similar story in the New Testament? The feeding of the 5,000 and women and children, which is found in all four gospels. Do you sense a theme in these miracle stories? With God, there is enough. God provides time and time again. I have a friend and colleague, who when she senses undue anxiety, especially in me, she'll annoyingly but rightly remind me, "Isn't God a God of abundance?" After walking away, I feel convicted every time for operating in a mindset of scarcity.

So then what gets in our way of believing because we all have need? Fear? Doubt? I came across a great quote by Elisabeth Elliot the other day. She says, "Fear arises when we imagine everything depends on us." Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us, "When I rely on my own strengths, when I think I have only my small, stingy little heart from which to draw love for the people around me, when the waters are rough and storms are real, and I am scared- filled with fear that I don't have what it takes to live as God wants me to live, I have forgotten about Jesus- Jesus, the One who makes something out of my nothing and walks toward me in the storm." God shows up and provides time and time again- there is enough, especially if we don't hoard it all- eg. Helene and toilet paper. Like Elijah, Elisha is

“empowered by God to feed, heal, and care for those on the margins of society. Their well-being did not come from the systems of political society. It came from God alone” (Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). And even still, both of these prophets struggled to keep the people of Israel’s focus on their God with whom they had a covenant relationship. I heard a preacher once ask the gathered flock, “Do you want to experience the supernatural provision of God or do you want to live a completely explainable life?” There are plenty of ways to try and explain things away. Many of us do it or have done it, especially the conspiracy theorists amongst us. Being a Christian can be sometimes a wee bit embarrassing, especially in today’s world. I love the way a pastor describes this perfectly. She says, “I mean, since I believe in Jesus, sometimes it feels like my normal unchurched friends look at me like they suspect I might also believe elves in trees really do make Keebler Cookies. It’s all a bit fantastical this Jesus stuff and the miracles are especially embarrassing to say you believe in. Afterall, it’s more reasonable to believe that things are only what they seem. Water stays water, oil doesn’t multiply out of thin air, 20 loaves stay 20 loaves and the dead stay dead” (Nadia Bolz-Weber, [sermon](#)). I believe in miracles **not because I think I’m supposed to but because I need to. I need to believe that God does what we cannot do.** Can’t we all agree that God is different from us? “Because if God just acted in ways we could – we could all just be our own gods. And if history tells us anything,...it’s that we make terrible gods. But I wonder if, like the disciples, we too make the mistake of not always realizing how different God is from us and what a good thing that is. We have a God who can actually feed so many on so little- a God who

created the universe out of nothing- ex-nihlio, a God who can put flesh on dry bones, a God who can bring life out of death, **NOTHING is God's favorite material to work with**" (Bolz-Weber).

This biblical story of scarcity vs. abundance rears its' head everyday in our lives- how we make our decisions, etc. Will there be enough, Lord? Many of us like the man who brought his first fruits, ask, "How is this ever going to work? Here, Elisha, whose name in Hebrew means "God is salvation," offers us a model of faith, as does the widow, who is unnamed. They believe that God is a God of abundance but sometimes we forget that, don't we?! We can be people of little faith, can't we? Elisha, the widow, and the neighbors model for us a life full of hope. It is not a life without challenges because we see Elisha constantly in the midst of challenges. We can be God's vessels for others for God doesn't call us to "fine;" God calls is to "faith." Elisha's faith- his reliance on God- allows him to shape his hope in the God of abundance and respond to other's needs" (Garrett Galvin, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

I came across a poem written by Amy Schmidt in memory of Mary Oliver entitled, "Abundance." Schmidt writes, *It's impossible to be lonely when you're zesting an orange. Scrape the soft rind once and the whole room fills with fruit. Look around: you have more than enough. Always have. You just didn't notice until now.* "Isn't God a God of abundance?," my friend asks. "Accept the miracle," says Mary Oliver. "Look around: you have more than enough," writes Amy Schmidt. God is a God of miracles. There is enough to go around! Do you believe?! Amen.