

Reflection: Living in the Face of Death Leenane Shiels 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17 Pentecost 2, June 6, 2010

Our readings today have several common themes, but the one that really stayed with me through the week as I prepared was that of living life in the face of death.

The time I spent at the hospital this year as a spiritual care chaplain intern taught me a lot about living life in the face of death. Actually, the time wasn't the teacher, it was the patients and families whom I got to know, and walk with in some surprising encounters.

One young man had been battling leukemia for so long that all of the friends he had made when he first came on the bone marrow transplant unit had died. He knew his prognosis, and yet he lived life hopefully and happily, literally "One day at a time." When I asked him about what kept him going, he replied that his faith in God, and World of Warcraft. What on earth, I wondered, and he went on to explain the support from a very surprising source, an online community of gamers who played a MMPORPG (Massive Multi Player Online Role Playing Game) called "World of Warcraft." These people who kept him going, who sustained him, were technically strangers to him—he had never met them in real life, and yet his room was filled with cards and letters from them, and even the laptop he used was bought with money they raised. He showed me how God can work with very unusual agents of grace, even virtual ones, especially in the shadowed borderland time of living life in the face of death.

Despite Elijah's "fame" and "status" as a prophet—we don't know anything about his origins or call by God, as we do with most other prophets. Just his name —Eli'yahu—My God is Yahweh. He just appears suddenly on the scene—denouncing King Ahab's apostasy. You see, Ahab had made the mistake of marrying Jezebel, a foreign queen—a worshipper of Ba'al, a Canaanite god of rain and fertility, and Ahab had joined in her worship of her foreign gods. In the verses before our story begins today we hear about how Elijah proclaims to Ahab that there was going to be a drought in the land that would last for years—a pretty good way to show up Baal as a false god really!

But after making this prophetic declaration, he is told by Yahweh, to get out of town—to go and hide in the wilderness, at the Wadi Cherith—where he was to be provided for.

Now, we have already seen that God's provision is often surprising—remember the strange manna for the Israelites in the time of Exodus? Well, Elijah is going to be brought food by a most unlikely provider—wild ravens—brought him bread and meat twice a day, and he had water to drink from the wadi. But after a while this stream dried up, and the Word of the Lord came to him saying "Go now to Zarephath in Sidon, and stay there. I have commanded a woman, a widow there to feed you."

OK, if you think of it, this is stranger even than being fed by ravens. Yahweh is sending Elijah out of Israel, to hide from King Ahab and Jezebel his Sidonian Queen, in Zarephath—a port town in Sidon. And not only was he to hide in foreign territory, he was to be provided for by one who was classed among the

most vulnerable in society—a woman who was a widow with a child. Elijah sets out for Zarephath—quite a trek for him. When he gets to the gate of the town—he sees a widow gathering sticks—and he asks her to bring him some water to drink. She must have known that he was foreign to her parts, his different accent—and just imagine what Elijah looked like after his stay in the wilderness and his long journey on foot to the coast. He must have been dirty and unkempt, as well as thirsty and hungry. She responds with compassion and hospitality, and goes to get him a drink of water.

But when his request changes into an additional request for a little food, her tone changes. She becomes downcast—and admits that she has very little food—in fact she only has a handful of flour in a jar and little oil in a jug. She is gathering sticks so that she can go home and cook a last meal for her and her son, after which they will starve to death.

What is Yahweh thinking—sending Elijah on this wild goose chase? One time when I was in the Downtown Eastside on my way to Co-Op radio where my choir was singing, I was stopped at a crosswalk waiting for the light to turn, when a local man, grinning an empty toothed smile at me, asked me if I was hungry. He pulled out a half dozen different candy bars from his pocket, and said—please have one—I got all this candy and I want to share it. It was so surprising—a reversal of the interaction one would have expected. He was not asking for anything. This generous guy was wanting to share from his meager abundance. I hesitated for a moment—would I risk offending him if I said “no thanks?” But his smile and generosity won out, and I took a Mars bar from him, and was reminded about how amazing it feels when someone shares what they have with you. It felt like an encounter with an angel right there on the corner of Main and Columbia.

In the story, the poor widow becomes God’s really unlikely provider for Elijah—

a woman and child on the brink of death. But Elijah doesn’t give up—he knows that Yahweh has promised that he will be cared for, and he trusts the Word of the Lord. And so he shares some of the my favourite words in the bible—“Do not be afraid”. These words signify that something amazing is about to happen.

“Do Not Be Afraid” is like music to the ears of an anxious person, except I think that as a church we are afraid. Not particularly this church at Dunbar, but the church in Vancouver, the United Church of Canada, mainline liberal churches—we are afraid. Afraid that we won’t have enough for ourselves, never mind the strangers who come to our doors. We are like the widow gathering sticks to cook our last meal. Fear of death is causing churches to focus inwards at a time when we need to be listening to the call of God to reach out and care for the weak, vulnerable, marginalized, to speak out prophetically against oppression and injustice, to live out into God’s dream here on earth. The national church is having to make cutbacks. In this our 85th anniversary year, we are facing a second round of cuts in the millions of dollars that include the loss of 15-20 staff at the General Council Office over the triennium, and reductions in

grants to mission support, global partners, theological schools, and education centres¹.

One local clergy person, David Ewart who has a talent for numbers, recently shared projections for a typical United Church congregation into 2025—the 100th anniversary year of the United Church of Canada. Based on existing statistics and using statistical trends, he projects that in 2025 a United Church of Canada congregation will have:

- 107 Members,
- 14 Average Weekly Attendance,
- 52 Financially Supporting Households
- 0 New Members Received by Profession of Faith by the year 2020,
- 0 Members in Sunday School by the year 2018,
- 0 Baptisms (All Ages) by the year 2020,
- 0 Weddings by the year 2019
- 4 Funerals

Ouch. Now I'm really getting afraid. I'm feeling pretty much like the widow facing death—given those projections it seems that the church as we know it is facing death. Sometimes our voices crying out “The church is dying” drown out God's quiet reassurance not to be afraid. Perhaps I am exhibiting a sign of insanity in preparing for ministry in this church—perhaps I should pack up my books and go home. But I won't, I have heard “Do not be afraid” it has become like a mantra for me, and I think there are many others who are hearing it too.

In the story of Elijah and the widow—“Do not be afraid,” is followed by instructions to first make a little cake of bread for Elijah, and then with what is left over, she can feed herself and her son. God promises that the jar of meal and the jug of oil will not be emptied. Notice that God does not promise that when she returns home there will be a full larder including all kinds of other goodies. The promise is that there will be enough to sustain both the stranger and the widow and her son, until the drought ends. Are we in this position too in the church—just needing to trust the Word of God not to be afraid and that we really can hope for life in the face of death?

But that's not where the story ends—there is no “and they all lived happily ever after,” ending. The story of Elijah and the widow may have been passed on generation after generation as a folktale until it was written down, but it's no fairy tale! It takes a strange turn when we hear that the son of the widow became ill, so severely ill that he had no breath left in him. He was hovering between life and death. This poor woman—she has nothing at all as precious to her as her son. She is distraught—and angry. Angry at Elijah—it must be his fault somehow, he must have brought his foreign God Yahweh's wrath on her. And she's angry at herself—she is also blaming her own sins on her son's death.

Elijah's reaction is also surprising. One would expect him to deny any culpability – to defend himself and Yahweh from her accusations, but he tenderly takes the child from his mother's breast. Perhaps this child was still nursing? We don't know it's age. And he carries him out upstairs to the room in which he is

¹ <http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/100503>

lodging. And then he addresses his God with what? I don't know, perhaps exasperation, anger, and agony "O Lord, My God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying by killing her son?" Then he does something even stranger than taking the dead son from his mother—he stretches himself over the child lying on his bed three times while crying out a prayer "O Lord, let this child's life come into him again." He has a vision of this child living. He could see the potential and possibility of this child's life, and he knew that it was worth fighting for. Back in the upper room of the widow's house, the narrator tells us that "The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah: the life of the child came into him again and he revived." His prayer is answered, and Elijah brings the living child back downstairs and returns him to his mother, who responds with a heartfelt confession of faith in Yahweh.

If we go back to the analogy of the church living in the face of death—is it a stretch to imagine that it is possible for life to come back into the dying? No—I don't think it is—but I think that like Elijah, we have to have a vision of that life. A prophetic vision for how to live into God's mission in the world. When I was preparing for today's sermon, one website commentary took me to the amazing vision statement of First Congregational Church in Cambridge Massachusetts².

"Imagine a church that cannot stay put, but takes God's welcome into the world. Imagine a church in conversation with other lives, other cultures, able to invite and be invited, to sit at other people's tables, to learn and share the inestimable riches of God, to build relationships outside its walls. Imagine a church where the hands, hearts and feet of every member, young and old, are shaped for service, and a church that does not lack imagination about ways to use them. Imagine a church compelled by the Spirit to travel with Jesus, healing, reconciling and doing justice, a church filled with the daring and delight of the children of God. Imagine a church on the open road, agile and able, willing to follow Jesus into life's margins, a church that gives itself away and asks nothing in return, a church mobilized for mission: Imagine First Church in Cambridge!"

Wow—what a compelling vision they have—a shared vision with God and each other. And they're living it out. I think that if our church—and here I mean all levels of the church—locally, nationally, globally was in touch with that prophetic voice and vision, that we would be better able to navigate this strange place and time between life and death. Today after church we have our congregational meeting. We will hear reports of the past year, celebrate our part in God's mission, and continue to discern together what is God's vision for us here at Dunbar Heights United Church. Listen for God's word to us in this text. "Do not be afraid!" We will be given enough for our mission, and we will live as people of hope in resurrection to new life in the face of death. May it be so. Amen.

² Kate Huey's Lectionary Reflection for the week at <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/june-06-2010-tenth-sunday.html> referenced the vision statement of First UCC Church in Cambridge, Mass. Their vision statement can be found on a page God's Vision for us: A Way of Hospitality <http://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/pages/about/vision/>