

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Second Option”

June 6, 2010

Reverend Art Ritter

1 Kings 17: 8-24

8 Then 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.

17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸She then said to Elijah, ‘What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!’ ¹⁹But he said to her, ‘Give me your son.’ He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰He cried out to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?’ ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.’ ²²The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, ‘See, your son is alive.’ ²⁴So the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.’

A week or so ago I was watching a news report on the tragic and devastating oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico. The report was detailing the “top kill” effort to halt the leak, discussing its possibilities for success and the alternatives in case of failure. As we all know now, the effort was proven to be futile. But at the time, when the outcome was uncertain, the news anchor was questioning an environmental reporter about what might happen next. She said, “Does BP or the federal government have a Plan B?”

The reporter responded, "I think that we are already well past Plan B. We are looking at Plan L or M or N."

I have often heard my daughter Maren offer one of her favorite quotes. I could not remember it completely and I didn't know to whom to give credit so I called her to get my information straight. Here is what she told me: "The key to a successful life is the graceful execution of Plan B." An important lesson to learn in life, don't you think? Maren attributes the quote to Brent Wagner, chair of the Musical Theatre department at the University of Michigan. Perhaps that gives the words of wisdom extra weight in my own mind, because it would seem that those who choose such a profession as musical theatre must certainly always have a Plan B in mind.

In these difficult economic times, many of us have had to alter our career and vocational plans, simply to survive. A few months ago *National Public Radio* offered a segment on how the current financial crisis has affected people's job and career plans. They gathered a group of 100 people and asked them how many of them, with regard to career, were still on their "Plan A." Only one person in the group of 100 raised their hand. That person was 23 years old. All of the others, and most of us have learned that the way of life takes us places that were not part of our Plan A, or perhaps B, C, or D. We sometimes find ourselves in a situation which comes to fruition in the most unlikely place, with the most unlikely people, and with the most unlikely resources at our disposal. We have to be ready and open to surprise alternatives when they come.

I don't know if you will remember, but just a couple of weeks ago when we were honoring our Confirmation Class, the young men were given a chance to read from part of their final papers. Nicholas Graham read that his favorite Bible story was the account from I Kings of the widow offering of her small reserve of food, to feed the prophet Elijah. Even though she is very poor, she shares everything of what she has, risking tomorrow's food on the gift of hospitality offered to a stranger. The prophet takes the water and the food and somehow makes certain that it is enough to help the widow and her son survive into the future. Later in the story, the son becomes ill, so sick that it appears he has died. Elijah is so moved by widow's earlier kindness that he heals the son, bringing him back from the dead by the power of God. Nicholas mentioned that he liked the lessons of hospitality and new life contained in the single story. I do too. In fact while growing up in the church, the stories of the prophet Elijah were some of my favorite ones in the entire Bible.

I am drawn to the circumstances surrounding the main characters in this story. Elijah, warned by God that a drought was at hand to punish the people of Israel for their lack of reliance upon God, was living in the wilderness. He was drinking water from a brook and eating bread and meat delivered by raven. But after awhile the brook dried up and apparently the raven stopped home delivery. God then sent Elijah to the village of Zarephath where he was assured that a widow there will feed him. For Elijah the move to Zarephath was surely Plan B or more likely C. He had to trust that somehow in such circumstances, God would provide.

The widow was in even worse shape. As a widow, her needs were considered last among many. When Elijah showed up at her door requesting a drink, she was carrying a load of firewood to cook what she assumed would be the last meal she and her son could afford to eat. Unbelievably, Elijah asks for some of the already meager supply of bread to go with his water. The poor widow wants to offer hospitality but the

food she has isn't enough. After she and her son eat it, they will simply wait for death. Yet the prophet tells her to consider an alternative plan. "Do not be afraid. Make me a cake. The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will last." And so she trusted in those words and she and her son and the prophet ate for many days.

Later when her son takes ill, it is the prophet Elijah who becomes the instrument by which God gives life back to her son. By helping Elijah survive, the woman has actually helped her son to live. Even though the prophet and the widow were placed in scenes and situations that were not part of their Plan A, God provided in the most unlikely manner a way to survive, to thrive, and to find new life.

In our Plan A, we usually train ourselves to think that fulfillment is just around the next corner. We work toward the next achievement, the next acquisition, and the next part of life. We try to possess things because we believe they can provide us with happiness and well-being. We live in a world that insists there must be scarcity so we need to stock away our share so we can feel secure. We indulge ourselves and over consume. We try to find things that make life easier but end up tethered to things that will not let us enjoy life.

As I mentioned before, there are some wonderful things happening in this story, things which apply to our own life and our own world. There is the power of God behind every action, both seen and unseen. There are acts of mercy upon dried up ground and in dried up lives. There are weak and small ones lifted up. There is hospitality and giving that change even the direst situation. There is a message that God provides in the most unlikely of places and by the strangest of means. There is the grace of God that becomes evident in the living of Plan B when we have worked and worried ourselves into exhaustion seeking the successful execution of our own Plan A.

In his book on the prophets Elijah and Elisha, theologian Walter Brueggeman calls these circumstances God's "otherwise." The otherwise is the term he uses to describe God's way, instead of the "worn-out, despair-producing, cynicism-provoking ways of thinking and acting that we believe to be the way the world has to work." The otherwise is the "new unimaginable, decisively different way" of God. Brueggeman says that the actions of Elijah and the widow showed the world could be different and that those in the world could act differently. Brueggeman urges us to consider the example of the prophet in the words and deeds of Jesus. He asks us to see ourselves differently, "to reconstrue our own lives out beyond the closed definitions we have too long inhaled...to venture out into the land of possibility." God's otherwise is built on trust, hospitality, compassion, and imagination.

When we allow God to be God in our world, creation is good and there is enough for all. When we allow God to be God in our lives, we are not afraid of what will be and we are set free to care for one another. When we allow God to be God in our words and our deeds, God's welcome is extended in what we say and God's hospitality and compassion become alive in our every action.