

Faith-full Obedience

1 Kings 17:1-16

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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One of the insurance companies you see advertised on TV is GEICO, and it has as its slogan, “15 minutes can save you 15% or more.” Its chief spokesperson is a small green gecko. The gecko has become nearly as recognizable as the AFLAC duck. In one commercial the gecko is talking with the president of the company, and the president is very pleased with the latest results of their advertising campaign. The gecko points out that the company offers good coverage at an affordable rate. The president of the company then suggests that he and the gecko engage in one of those trust exercises you hear about, in which a person closes his eyes and falls backwards into the arms of someone who promises to catch him. The commercial fades away as you see the president trusting that the gecko will catch him, and the gecko’s last words are, “Oh, dear...”

Sometimes in this world we’re asked to do more, to give more, to be more than we think possible. Sometimes we’re asked to do something we don’t think we have the wherewithal to accomplish. There are times when our notions of trust are pushed to the limits by circumstances or by the direction we receive.

Such is often the case in the life of faith. Throughout our lives we will find ourselves in circumstances that test what we think we can do. Sometimes we seek direction from God, only to find that the direction God offers doesn’t make sense to us. And yet the expectation is the same whenever we hear direction or counsel from God: the expectation is that we should trust what God says to us.

How do you do that? How do you trust when it doesn’t make sense?

In this morning’s lesson from 1 Kings, we encounter two models of the kind of trust that our faith calls us to place in God. Both Elijah and the widow from Zarephath demonstrate remarkable trust when trust doesn’t seem to make sense.

Elijah is one of the pivotal characters of the Bible. He is the model for prophets in the Old Testament, confronting kings and religious officials concerning their unjust and corrupt ways. He called down fire on the prophets of Baal, and he predicted the death of Ahab and Jezebel. It was Elijah who encountered God on the mountain—not in a ferocious wind, nor in a mighty earthquake, nor in a fire, but in a still, small voice. Perhaps most remarkable was that Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind; and it was Elijah who was to return before the coming of the Messiah.

As we pick up the story of Elijah in this morning’s text, Elijah is instructed by God to inform king Ahab that there would be no rain in the land until the Lord commanded it to rain; the context of this proclamation leads us to believe that the Lord is exercising judgment on the evil that Ahab had committed through his greed, corruption, and the influence of his evil wife Jezebel. The Lord then instructed Elijah to go into the wilderness and stay by a stream where he could have water, and to let the birds feed him his daily bread.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.”¹ The instructions seem straightforward enough, but do they make sense? How many of you would simply trust your ears if you were to hear God say to you, “Don’t worry, I’ve ordered the birds to feed you?”

And yet there is no sign that Elijah hesitated or questioned God in the least bit. For the text simply says, “So [Elijah] did what the Lord had told him.”² It was a faith-filled obedience that was required of Elijah, and it was a faith-filled obedience that Elijah gave in response to the word of the Lord.

I wonder what would give Elijah that kind of faith? I wonder what it would take to have a faith that trusts God even when trusting God really doesn’t make sense? And yet Elijah obeyed God nonetheless, and God honored his obedience by providing for him just as God had promised.

When the stream had dried up from the drought, God then commanded Elijah to go to Zarephath in Sidon, where he would be fed by a widow. Again, the text doesn’t comment on any reservations Elijah may have had; it simply says, “So he set out and went to Zarephath...”³ And yet surely there must’ve been some consternation in Elijah when he heard God’s instructions. For you see, Zarephath was 100 miles away, reachable only by way of a long journey through a harsh and unforgiving wilderness. And on top of that, Zarephath was only a few miles from the hometown of Jezebel, Elijah’s arch-nemesis. And then, of all the people that God would appoint to provide for Elijah, why would God choose the one least able to do so—a poor widow with problems of her own?

And yet Elijah went to Zarephath. Without protest. Without question. I wonder what would give Elijah that kind of faith? I wonder what it would take to have a faith that trusts God even when trusting God really doesn’t make sense?

But Elijah is not the only one with the faith to trust God even when trusting God doesn’t make sense, is he? For the widow also becomes a hero in this story. She becomes a hero because she hears the word of God, and despite the desperation of her own circumstances, she is willing to trust the word of God and obey what she hears. Here is this woman, destitute to the point that she and her son will share just one more meal before they starve to death, and yet on the basis of Elijah’s assurance that God would not let her oil and flour run out until God sent the rain to replenish the earth this woman was willing to offer hospitality to Elijah. “Here is a woman about to die with her child, a mother unable to feed her little boy, who still manages to love her neighbor as herself.”⁴

I wonder what would give the widow that kind of faith? I wonder what it would take to have a faith that trusts God even when trusting God really doesn’t make sense?

Do you ever wonder what it would take to have that kind of faith? Do you ever wonder how a person can muster up enough faith to walk in the kind of obedience that we find in our text this morning? As I reflected on Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, I observed three attitudes that I believe are necessary if any of us are to have what it would take to have a faith that is willing to trust and obey even when trusting and obeying doesn’t really make sense.

¹ 1 Kings 17:2-4

² 1 Kings 17:5

³ 1 Kings 17:10

⁴ Heidi Neumark, “The Widow’s Hand,” *The Christian Century*, September 27-October 4, 2000, p. 943.

The first attitude is the belief that God's plans and purposes are always greater and better than our own, even when we are unable to understand the wisdom behind God's plans and purposes. The truth is, you and I only see the very tip of the tip of the iceberg of life. We only get the briefest of glimpses of our world. And yet we somehow will believe that we know enough to know better than God. But God sees the big picture. God knows every detail. And God's plans and purposes for you and me and for this world in which we live are based on his intimate knowledge of how everything fits together. So often you and I can barely see what tomorrow will bring; God, though, already knows what all the tomorrows will bring, and so his plans and purposes are made according to his infinite knowledge and wisdom.

The second attitude that is necessary to have what it takes in order for us to have the wherewithal to trust even when trusting doesn't make sense, is the attitude that believes that our safety and our security are not ultimately in our own hands, but in God's hands. It is God who protects and provides for us. Does that mean that we shouldn't lock our doors or go to work tomorrow? Of course it doesn't mean that, because the locks on the doors and the work we have are means by which God has chosen to give us protection and provision. But ultimately we must recognize that what we have is not the result of our labor, but of the gracious care of God; furthermore, we should admit that it is not the lock on the door that protects the house.⁵ Your well-being and my well-being is not so much a product of what you have done in your life or what I have done in my life, as it is a product of the gracious provision and protection of God. If I am going to trust God even when it doesn't make sense, then I'm going to need to recognize that my ultimate safety and security is not in my hands, but in God's hands.

The third attitude that you and I will need if we are going to be able to trust God even when trusting God doesn't make sense is the attitude that believes every dealing that God has with us is defined by and informed by God's unending, unconditional love. We have to trust that God's plans and purposes for our lives are designed in conformity with God's steadfast love. Stephen Hayner, the new president of Columbia Theological Seminary, says that "trust is leaning into God's character and goodness."⁶ It is much easier to lean into God's character when you know that God is love.

I'm not talking about the mushy feel-good Hollywood style of love. I'm talking about the love that is willing to give of self for the good of the other. I'm talking about the love that cares about the welfare of the other. I'm talking about the love that is so great that the One who loves us sent his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. I'm talking about the kind of love that is willing to wash someone's feet. I'm talking about the kind of love that is willing to lay down one's life for one's friends.

If you and I are going to be able to trust God even when trusting God doesn't make sense, then we need to embrace the fact that God loves us and God will work all things for our good.

Years ago a pastor was traveling by ship with his young daughter across the ocean. Earlier that particular Sunday he had preached a sermon about God's love. It had been a very difficult service to preach, because he was newly widowed. He was standing against the rail of the ship, looking out at the vast and magnificent ocean, when his daughter asked him if God loved them as much as they had loved her late mother.

⁵ This attitude is described in detail in Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 77.

⁶ Stephen Hayner, "Turning Points", www.day1.org

“Of course He does,” answered her father. “There is absolutely nothing bigger or more powerful and all-consuming than God’s love for us. It’s the biggest thing there is!” The little girl pressed on for more information, wanting to know exactly how big God’s love was. Finally her father with great tenderness said, “Well, look across the sea as far as you can. Look up and down and all around. God’s love stretches around to cover all of that; above the blue sky and deeper than the deepest part of the ocean underneath us.”

The little girl pondered for a minute and replied, “And to think Daddy, we’re right in the middle of it.”

And we are. We’re right in the middle of God’s love. I think that if we’re ever going to be able to trust God even when trusting God doesn’t make sense, then we’re going to have to know that we’re right smack dab in the middle of God’s love. All of our lives are engulfed by God’s love.

How about you—what do you need in your life if you’re going to trust God even when trusting God doesn’t make sense?