

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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June 6, 2010  
*10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time / Anniversary Sunday*  
1 Kings 17:1-16

### **God's Story, Our Story**

Happy Anniversary, all! Whether you have been part of this congregation for decades or you've come here for the first time this morning, happy anniversary to you. This is the day we are celebrating 138 years of ministry of First Presbyterian Church in Bozeman, the oldest continuing Presbyterian church in the state of Montana. This is also the day we are commemorating 100 years of worshiping and serving in and from this building, on this corner of Willson and Babcock. The building's cornerstone says 1908, but that was when they started construction. This sanctuary was dedicated with prayers and songs and the Word of God preached by the Reverend J.N. Maclean on February 20, 1910. For 100 years people have encountered God in this place. The prayers of all those saints surround us this day.

100 years ago people walked or rode horses or came in carriages to these doors, and sat in these pews, the ladies in their floor-sweeping long dresses and oversized hats, the gentlemen in Edwardian suits. (Or maybe, because we are in Montana, things were a little less formal.) 100 years ago they built the finest house of worship they could imagine, one which has stood the test of time and still catches the breath of newcomers with its beauty and reverence. We are profoundly grateful for their sacrifices and hard work which gave us this legacy of devotion and a place to worship God.

But it wasn't about the grandeur of the place then, and it isn't about grandeur now. It wasn't about its beauty either, although its beauty continues to bless us, both visually and musically. This building was built to glorify God and to equip people for God's mission in the world. This building is about God's story, and the people who have joined themselves to God's story in this place.

God's story, if you believe the Bible, is heavily populated with widows, orphans and strangers. We meet all three in today's story about the great prophet Elijah. He's the first one we meet, and he is STRANGE. A holy man, a wild man, Elijah is described elsewhere in the scriptures as "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist." (2 Kings 1:8) He appears with no introduction in the court of King Ahab to announce an impending drought. Now, if you lived in Elijah's day you wouldn't need to have this explained, but what Elijah is really doing is announcing a face-off between his God, Yahweh, and Ba'al, the god of Ahab's sinister queen Jezebel. Ba'al is the rain god, but Elijah claims that Yahweh controls the rain and the sun and everything else, that Yahweh is the one worthy of all worship and praise, Yahweh is the whose righteous and just way should be guiding the king. Thus begins the battle of the gods. And just as Elijah said it would, the rain stops.

Some of us would have liked to hear that kind of weather forecast earlier this week. We wanted to get our grass mowed and our gardens planted! But we know that long-term drought is no fun. The land dries up, crops fail, animals die and humans suffer. It is this kind of drought which Elijah is talking about, and after delivering his antagonistic message, throwing down the gauntlet before Ahab and Jezebel and Ba'al, he gets out of Dodge as fast as he can to find a place to hide. Picture a ravine in the badlands, with a stream that is fed only by surface water. The Wadi Cherith is such a stream. It gives Elijah

sustenance, while ravens deliver food. Alone in the wilderness, Elijah becomes wilder and woolier and closer to God. Months pass; the drought intensifies, and the stream dries up. It is time to find another place to take refuge.

It might have been wise to find family or friends, to head for a village known to be faithful to Yahweh. But no, Elijah shows up in Zarephath, a Canaanite town in Jezebel's home territory of Sidon, Ba'al-worshiping country. Sort of like an Israeli seeking refuge in a Palestinian town—talk about risking hostility and rejection. It would have made sense, too, to find a wealthy landowner, a rich man who could give him some work and a way to earn his keep. But no, Elijah speaks to the first person he sees, a woman gathering sticks. Her stick-gathering tells us that she's poor, and she confirms that she is a widow. Without a man in the house, she has no status. She does have a son, but without a father in the house, he is considered an orphan. They are preparing to eat their last meal, for that's all that's left in the house. So here's the picture: in the middle of a drought, Elijah, the starving stranger, meets a poor widow and an orphan who are strangers to him, whose allegiances are on the other side of a political and cultural and religious divide, and he asks them for something to eat. What could be a more hopeless, desperate situation?

But it's not just in the Old Testament that strangers encounter widows and orphans in hopeless situations. And it's not just in ancient Israel than God's messengers challenge those in power, live on the margins, and risk rejection by crossing human dividing lines. This is a theme in God's story, isn't it, for it is also the story of Jesus. According to Luke's gospel, Jesus began his ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee, in the region around his home town of Nazareth. He was gaining quite a reputation when he was invited back to his home synagogue. But his debut sermon there ended in disaster when he hinted to the home town crowd that he wasn't going to be their patron miracle worker. "There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah," he told them, "yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon." (Lk 4:25-26) Jesus was announcing that he would not be domesticated and that God's way is to choose the least likely people for God's purposes. The stranger, the widow, the orphan—these people stand for where God is to be found in the world, and how God is at work in the world. God's story is filled with marginalized people in hopeless situations that no human can answer.

Rufus Watson knew that. Rufus was the son of former slaves, who lived to be 99 years old. He served in the U.S. military, he pitched in the Negro leagues, he made some money in real estate, he witnessed lynchings, and he wondered all his life how people could do such awful things and still call themselves Christians. He told his young pastor how he loved the story of Elijah and the widow and her son. "That's where God meets us, Jim, at the bottom of the barrel. God meets us when we've gone so low that all we can do is look up." (H. James Hopkins, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, p. 103)

The widow, the orphan, and the stranger were at the bottom of their barrels. And when they looked up, they saw God looking back at them, blessing them with enough food and water to keep them going through the drought. The jar of meal and the jug of oil never ran out. Rufus Watson experienced a century of living in a society which tried to tell him he was less than a full human being. His testimony was that though the world tried to beat him down, God sustained his life. Jesus was chased out of his home town, framed by the political and religious establishment, whipped and scorned, marched to the edge of the city

and hung on a cross. At the bottom of his barrel, he submitted to death and was buried. And then he looked up and saw God lifting him up, raising him to new life. God's story is all about the saving of people who are not rich or powerful or successful or on top. God's story is one of hope for the hopeless, home for the stranger and never-ending life for the needy.

Can you find yourself in God's story? Could it be your story, too?

The word from God in this story on this anniversary Sunday is two-fold—a warning and a promise. The warning is not to be like Ahab and Jezebel, who worshiped other gods and thought they were on top of the world. The promise is that God will be there for us just as he was for Elijah and the woman and her son when we reach the bottom of our barrels. If we look at this beautiful church building and fill ourselves with pride at its grandeur, we risk closing the door on becoming part of God's story. For to enter God's story requires humility. We need to know our poverty, our neediness, our despair in order to know God. If we see only the loveliness of the stained glass and the artistry behind the architecture and the craftsmanship of all the woodwork, we risk missing the reason why they were created—to lift our eyes above the ordinary, beyond life's sorrows, heavenward to God's love and mercy and peace. If we celebrate 100 years of worship in this space but fail to consider the people whose prayers and praise over the years have made this a house of God, then we risk it becoming a museum, an artifact of a time when faith was alive.

This story tells us that there are no hopeless situations in God's story, for God is there for the widows, orphans, strangers, those who are poor, hungry, grieving, those who are desperate and those who are marginalized. Whatever our needs, we all live by God's faithful providence.

Thanks be to God for the stories which teach us to keep faith, for the table of mercy which shows us that God provides, and for Jesus, who welcomes us into God's eternal story.