

Andrew K. Frey

Epiphany 4

1 Kings 17:7-16

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.” ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’ ”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. (NIV84)

Theme: The Gospel Rains Blessings upon You

The last couple years the drought going on in the west, especially in California has been big news. Right now, about 40% of California is experiencing what experts call an “exceptional drought.” This means that there is widespread crop loss and due to shortages of water in reservoirs, rivers, and so on, there is a major water emergency. Because of this winter’s El Nino, the situation looks better than it did a few months ago—more rain has fallen recently and the snow pack in the Sierra Nevada’s looks promising. Folsom lake, outside of Sacramento and supplies water to almost a million people was at 14% capacity this fall; but now sits at 42% capacity. Yet, unless the rain really starts coming down between now and April they’ll probably enter the summer still in some sort of drought.

Holy Cross, Standish, MI.

January 31, 2016

By the time the prophet Elijah makes his way up to Zarephath the land of Israel had been suffering through a horrible drought for a while. In all, God kept rain away from Israel for 3 1/2 years. Not one drop of rain or dew for 3 1/2 years. Think about it, as bad as the drought is in Southern California, the Los Angeles area still have 8 1/2 inches last season. This was a major, catastrophic drought.

But during this time God wanted to save his prophet, Elijah; so he sent him to the Kerith Ravine, a small tributary of the Jordan River. There Elijah stayed, drinking from the stream and twice a day God sent ravens to Elijah with food in their mouths so that he could eat. But eventually the brook dried up. So God sent Elijah north west to a town called Zarephath, which sat on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Zarephath wasn’t in Israel, it was Phoenician town, south of the major city, Sidon. But because of its proximity to Israel, they too were affected by the drought. The Lord decided to take care of Elijah through a widow who lived in that town and so Elijah made trek north and to the Sea.

Why would God send such a horrible drought on the Promised Land? As punishment. The people had turned away from the Lord. They started to follow the false gods of the people around them. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had led the people astray and to Baal worship, which consisted of ritual orgies. This wicked and despicable religion soon became the most-practiced religion of the land. As Paul points out in our second lesson that things got so bad that Elijah thought he was the only believer left. As it turns out God had kept 7000 believers in the land—but that is 7000 out of millions in the entire country. As a whole the Jews refused to listen and obey God’s Word, so he punished his people by sending on them a famine; a drought with absolutely no rain for 3 1/2 years.

Of course, we know that the Israelites were in the wrong and they deserved the punishment that God gave them. But, we may act like the Israelites more often than we think. Not that we openly reject God and his Word in favor of worshiping false gods, yet it often happens that we are too busy to get into God’s Word. Or, who hasn’t had it happen that you intend to pay attention during worship, but something happens or I say something in a sermon that gets your mind on something else, and soon I say “Amen” and you realize you missed

half the sermon. And at times, we may fail to listen to God through the ears of faith, instead we listen through the ears of skepticism, doubt, and the presuppositions of our sinful nature. We listen to what other people say about God or what society says about what is right and wrong. Instead of making reason a servant of the Word, we make it a master and ruler over the Word. And so we deny what God says in his Word in favor of the popular opinion of the day.

About 100 years after Elijah, another prophet, Amos, warned the Israelites about what would happen because they continued to reject the Word of the Lord and refused to listen without faith. **“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.”** God’s Word is often compared to a rain cloud—it waters a land for a while and then moves on and waters another place. We’ve seen this play-out throughout history. The Middle East were the first to have the gospel and from there it spread, after the Reformation it was Europe, and then on to North America. You’ll be hard pressed to find many true Christians in the Middle East any more, and the great Cathedrals of Europe are mostly empty on Sunday mornings. You can take a look around our society today and see that God’s Word is becoming less and less of a concern as we become more bold in our wickedness and rebellion. It may be, then, that the gospel is moving on to other places—the number of Christians in America is declining while growing abundantly in places like Africa.

When Elijah got to Zarephath he saw the widow gathering sticks. He asked her to get him some water to drink—not a small request in the middle of a severe famine but she went to go get some water for him anyway. Then he asked for some bread. But she said that she was gathering sticks to cook some bread using the last little bit of flour and oil for her and her son. That would be their last meal and then they would die of starvation. But Elijah told her to make some bread for him first, for the Lord promises, “She believed the Lord’s promise through Elijah and gave the Lord’s prophet some water and baked him some bread. For the rest of the famine Elijah stayed with the widow and her son and God kept the oil and flour coming so that he could save the three of them.

Again we mention that Zarephath was not in Israel. This widow and her son were not Jews, they were Gentiles. Jesus makes this point to the people in Nazareth. The people of Israel rejected the Lord and so the Lord sent the rain of his gospel to another land, to a gentile widow and her son so that he could save them. In a similar way the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus when he preached—they tried to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus simply walked right through them and went on to Capernaum and other cities in the area. The water of the gospel moved on to other people and other places.

That is how our gracious the Lord is. He graciously decided to save the widow of Zarephath and her son, not because of who they were or what they did—but simply out of his grace. And it is this same grace that leads the Lord to save us—not necessarily from drought or famine, not just from physical pain or attacks from the people of this world. Much more importantly, the Lord saves us from our sins and the eternal punishment that we deserve. We are all Gentiles here, not one of us is part of God’s chosen nation and yet our gracious Lord sent the waters of the gospel to us. He showed his love upon us and brought us to faith through the gospel.

And for the time being, the waters of that gospel still shower upon you. You have access to multiple Bibles in multiple formats—from the hardcovers we have in the pews, to your favorite copy with all your notes at home, to multiple websites, or one of the countless apps. The gospel is still here at Holy Cross, it is still in the WELS. We have not turned to man-made doctrines and opinions. We have not rejected the good news for the social gospel, that is, caring about the physical needs and making sure everyone is equal physically more than being concerned about the spiritual lives.

No, we still have the gospel, and thus, so do you. You have the good news of Jesus Christ—that the forgiveness of sins has already been won for you by his suffering and death on the cross. That his perfect life has been given to you so that the Lord looks at you and no longer sees your sins, but declares us not guilty. That by his resurrection you are guaranteed that you too will rise from the dead. It is this gospel that the Holy Spirit worked through to bring you to faith, increases your knowledge of his Word, and keeps you in the one true faith.

You still have this gospel. Through it God still showers his love upon you. Follow the example of the Widow of Zarephath—listen to the Word with the ears of faith. Study it, treasure it, and believe it! Don't let the gospel's rain move on to someone else. Don't let the gospel move on to another area, away from this congregation—but make use of the worship and Bible study opportunities that we have for you and your children, just as you are doing today! It may seem as if the gospel's rain clouds are moving on to another society, to other countries because our society as a whole has rejected the Lord. Yet, by grace, the gospel still showers blessings upon us. Let us then, treasure the Lord's Word and do what we can to lead others to do the same.

We have this promise from Isaiah that the Lord's Word is like the rain.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. The waters of the gospel work, through it seeds are planted which the Holy Spirit causes to grow into faith. So we not only treasure the Word, but we do what we can to share his Word with others so that they may hear and believe. And we do this in everywhere so that the gospel may rain down the Lord's love not only here, but in lands throughout the world that they may join this remnant saved by grace. Amen.