

*This sermon was given by the Rev. Devin McLachlan, rector of Parish of the Messiah, at St. John's Episcopal Church, Newtonville, as part of a 'pulpit swap' between Messiah and St. John's.*

Our reading from the Book of Kings tells a story of a family in Phoenicia that welcomes a stranger, an itinerant preacher -- thank you!  
I bring you greetings from your sister church, the Parish of the Messiah, where Fr. Mark is preaching this morning.

For the last few weeks,  
I keep finding myself drawn to the live webcam of the BP oil leak.  
It's a kind of moribund rubbernecking, an unfolding disaster on the ocean floor.

And at some point, I looked from the video stream of the oil leak, to the reading from Kings, and back again.

On one screen, I could see thousands of gallons of toxic oil, geysering into the once-rich waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

And on another screen,  
the reading from Kings, the widow's jar of oil that never ran out.

Two kinds of abundance:  
one filled with danger and the other filled with grace.

The abundance in the story of the widow of Zarapheth springs from a point of vivid, terrifying scarcity:

In a time of drought and famine,  
It was her last cup of grain,  
a handful of wheat, and more weevils than wheat,  
and barely enough oil to coat the pan,  
the dregs of sediment and rancid olives.

There is nothing extraordinary about this story.  
Families starve to death every day.

"Blessed are the poor," Jesus told the crowd gathered at the mountain.

But neither Jesus nor Elijah turned to a hungry woman or man, and said:  
"Blessed are the poor," and then walked away with an air of self-congratulation.

There is nothing *romantic* about hunger and poverty.

Elijah knew that a single woman with a young son, in those patriarchal times, had no way to earn food for herself.

Jesus knew that the funeral procession outside of Nain was not just mourning the death of a young man, but was anticipating (perhaps with morbid fascination, just as I watch the BP oil spill), anticipating the starvation of the widow as well.

Both Jesus and Elijah confronted systematic injustice,  
knowing that God had already provided enough for us all,  
if we knew where to look, if we knew how to share.

Both Jesus and Elijah trusted that if they were willing to take the risk,  
God would provide an abundance of what is needed:

*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.*

*Share the few loaves you have and those salted fish, Peter.  
I'm sure it will be enough for this crowd of five thousand.*

*Young man, I say to you, rise.*

Elijah's miracle -- well, of course, not Elijah's miracle, but God's miracle  
which Elijah simply announced -- was of fantastical abundance:

A constantly-replenishing source of oil, like the magical cauldron of the Dagda in Irish  
folklore, or the cornucopia in Greek mythology.

Such abundance, in the context of the Book of Kings, becomes a prophetic miracle --  
in the best sense of prophecy, which is not soothsaying to tell the future,  
but demonstrative of what the future can be  
when we live lives consonant with God's desire for us.

*This, the author of the Book of Kings tells us, this is what God's generosity is like. This is  
what God wants for us all -- not just in Judea and Israel, but in foreign lands as well, in  
Phonencia, in the whole world.*

Scripture is full of images of abundance, of resurrection and reconciliation,  
of the hungry being fed, the broken healed, the dead raised to life,  
not to say: *Check out how God can mess with the laws of physics and biology!*  
but to say: *This, this is how God wants us to live. Abundantly. Generously.*  
*Live without fear. Share everything you have -- your food, your joy, your sorrow, your doubts,*  
*your lives. Live without fear, live with complete reliance on God's love.*

Because *sometimes* self-congratulatory abundance can be dangerous and scarcity can be a blessing.

All you have to do is look at the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico  
to see what an abundance of hubris buys us.

The woman who would become Elijah's landlady had a simple choice:  
to eat her last serving of grain and then died of hunger,  
or share it with this stranger, and go hungry a day earlier.

Perhaps it is easier to share when you have so little. What is there to lose?

If the widow in Zarephath had been better off --  
if she had had enough to eat,  
would she would have looked at that foreign prophet Elijah,  
that strange, undocumented alien,  
and refused to give him even the cup of water?

Would it be easier to share what I have with the hungry,  
if my self-worth wasn't about my net worth, if I trusted more in God and less in  
the security of my refrigerator or my bank account?

Would it be easier to care for the environment,  
if I considered myself a steward of the world rather than the creator and owner?

Would it be easier to share my faith with others,  
if I wasn't confident that I know all there is to know about God?

Would it be easier to talk about God, if I had questions and doubts?

Would it be simpler to invite a friend to church, if I could say --

here is the community where I share my questions? Here is the place where you  
could come and teach us about how God moves in *your* life?

I'm going to try this week to live a little more like the widow from Zarephath,  
giving generously, living without fear,  
and less like the crowd following the widow of Nain,  
rubbernecking disasters.

Turn off the constant video of the oil spill  
and instead begin looking for how I can respond.

Seek out the places where we can live generously,  
where our questions, our inward and outward poverty,  
lead us to discover God's abundant grace.