

November 11, 2012

**The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Kings 17:8-16

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Some nerve.

“Do not be afraid”, he says, as if these words will take away from her the sheer terror she has felt over the last few weeks of watching her pitiful food supply dwindle and her son slowly waste away from starvation.

Do not be afraid? Who is this joker who has come to make fun of her, a widow and mother at the end of her tether? Who would say such a cruel and insensitive thing?

I did a quick search of the phrase “Do not be afraid” in the Bible. It comes up an astounding 67 times, almost exclusively from messengers: prophets and angels. That insensitive joker asking the widow for the very last food in her house? He was a prophet, a messenger from God, sent to tell her that God is good.

And, quite frankly, if a prophet shows up at my home and says "Do not be afraid", I, like the widow, would be terrified. Do not be afraid, they say, change is afoot, God is near. God is speaking, they say, listen!

Do not be afraid, they say, but something frightening is about to happen.

There is a lot to be afraid of. The election cycle that just ended played a lot on our fears: we are afraid of being sick and being unemployed. We are afraid being poor, being around poor people and how systemic poverty will affect our city and country. Some of our fears are self-constructed: we worry about social climbing, who will be president, about grey hair and gaining weight. Some of our fears are more legitimate: the safety of our children, losing our homes or our jobs, the poisoning our environment.

Anyone who has recently had a baby knows how powerful fear can be. The baby products industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that thrives on the fact that new parents worry deeply about our children's happiness, their safety, their education. With that worry, we buy products that reassure us that we can stave off sadness, accidents, illness, frustration and behavioral problems. Our houses are filled with fortunes in gadgets that promise miracles for our kids.

But gadgets, most of them, do not perform miracles. And over time, most new parents learn that there are no gadgets that we can buy that replace good parenting to create good and happy kids. Relationship with our children, presence even when it is difficult, honesty and trustworthiness are more

important than the stuff we buy in order to keep our fears at bay. We humans know, as God does, that no amount of perfect parenting will keep pain out of our houses, but strength of relationship and strength of faith will serve us more fully than anything we can purchase. Fear won't win. Love will. And love is abundant.

Where the world sees fear, God sees change  
Where the world promises scarcity, God promises abundance  
Where the world says "no way", "not enough", "impossible", God says "Yes!"

In a few weeks, we'll hear another angel say "Fear not!" to another woman with everything in the world to be afraid of. And she, like the starving widow, will say "yes" to whatever it is that God is offering, as profoundly unbelievable as it may be.

We do not know the content of the widow's heart any more than we know the content of Mary's. We do not know if she bakes that last cake with skepticism or with joy that her troubles are over. We do know that she says "yes", even when she is afraid. She says "yes" to the promise of God's abundance in her life. She says "yes" by welcoming the stranger, showing hospitality and grace.

We live in a world that wants to run on fear. Fear, it seems is a powerful motivator to get us to hoard and consume. Fear is a powerful motivator for us to spend and own and have. Fear causes us to keep secrets, grasp things and people tightly, to say "no" to hospitality and "no" to grace. Fear is a powerful motivator for us to build our houses with higher fences and stronger locks and around our hearts thicker, more impenetrable walls.

But fear won't win. Love wins. Every time. Fear breaks down and degrades our relationships and our families and our hearts. Love heals them, builds them, strengthens them.

How do we, like the widow at Zeraphath, move from a place of fear to a place of love? We start by opening our hands, just a little bit. Give something away. Money, time, stuff, something. Then take a deep breath. Say a prayer of thanksgiving.

Then do it again. And again. Give to your family and to those who are in need. Give to your church and to your community. Listen to what the world around you needs to thrive and grow, then dig deep and provide it. Give it away. Do not fear whether or not you will have enough. Fear won't win. Fear will not provide. The widow at Zaraphath learned that: fear would lead her to death. Showing love for this crazy prophet who showed up at her door lead her to life.

There are a lot of responses to the voice of God calling use into a scary new place. We can politely respond that there simply isn't enough, then we can shut the door and lie down to die. Or we can answer by believing in God's abundance. We can

be bold and brave and generous. We can say our prayers and give in love and faith. And we will grow. Do not be afraid.

Amen.