

July 18, 2021

Sermon: Do We Have the Spirit?
Old Testament Lesson II Kings 4:42-44
Gospel Lesson: Mark 6:30-45

The Bible has stories that seem incredulous to the modern mind. As a growing majority of young adults insist, they either don't believe in God or see no need for the Church, we need to take a new look at our stories. One of my primary concerns is that we now live in the "post-truth" age and the post-modern age. Post-truth infers that we now live in the age after truth. The atheists think they have at last won. They believe they have cleared the field of the silliness of faith and the uselessness of religion. They revel that each person claims his or her own truth. They embrace the post-modernists telling us that all meta-narratives – Big Stories – are mere power grabs by the people in charge of the stories. But I say unto you, not so fast.

Let me say clearly that I trust the stories of the Bible. Belief is a debate term; trust is a relational term. It's not about facts or proofs. I am asking you to trust the stories of the Bible, perhaps in some new and surprising ways. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith" (Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church, 107).

Let's face it. There are some unbelievable stories in the Bible. You are not a bad person for thinking, "Whoa! How can this be?" Here in 2 Kings 4, we have improbable stories about the power of Elisha stacked on top of one another. These stories cannot be squared with a modern scientific mind, but this doesn't mean they lack truth.

What then are we to make of stories that appear impossible in the Bible? The stories of Elisha tell us that God is a God of abundance in a world of scarcity.

We are educated people, and so we know these stories are legends, right? Nothing like this ever happens in Schenectady or Albany for that matter. Whatever you believe don't say, "Well, it's just a story. There's no such thing as "just" a story. Stories are packed with meaning, reality, wisdom, truth. Stories imagine a deeper reality, tell a bigger truth. What matters in these unbelievable sounding stories is this one reality: "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha" (2 Kings 2:15). Elijah had the spirit. He passed it to Elisha. Elisha passed it to the next in line and so it has gone this prophetic succession of the Spirit of the Living God. Look, church, we have to get us some of that. Even if we have to stand in line like we are at the grand opening of a new restaurant, we "gotta" have this Spirit.

God's abundance shows up in our reading. A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha told the man to feed the people. "How can I set this little bit of food before a hundred people?" Elisha insisted there would be enough for everyone. So, the man set the food before them and they all ate, and there was food left over. You can do a lot of living on God's leftovers. The abundance, the generosity of God can be trusted in a world afraid there will not be enough for us. A friend told me that he opposed universal health care because he was afraid that there wouldn't be enough for him if everyone had access. Now, you can think as you please about the politics of health care but notice the fear of not having enough. It can put a damper on life if you are always anxious about not having enough.

I have spent my entire life coaxing, persuading, seducing congregations into taking leaps of faith. I have served at least two churches where there was trouble because the churches were growing. I was in trouble because I did my job the only way I knew how. The majority resisted the growth. Or if the church needed a capital campaign or an enlarged budget or more funds to feed the hungry and house the houseless, there was resistance. "People were afraid that paying off a new mortgage would decimate our church budget. They were afraid that making room for more members would put an end to the intimacy that had drawn them to the church in the first place" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 99).

What I missed was that the people were genuinely afraid, and I mistook that fear as a lack of faith. The truth is that I was also afraid. I was afraid that I had pushed and pulled the congregation directly into an impasse and I knew that people were blaming me for it. Pastor and people consumed by fear, and I think that is the dominant force in the church today. I think fear dominates our nation. Black folks are afraid of white people. White people are afraid of becoming a minority. Conservatives are afraid of being called racists; liberals are afraid of being called wimps. We are all scared, and we hide it with bluster, braggadocio, crazy conspiracies, anger, and insisting on our rights. The indicator of our fear is how loud and obnoxious we have become. We are not sure we can trust the abundance of God, so we save money, cling to endowments, crunch the numbers – all good and necessary actions, but at some point, we are called to let go and trust God.

There's no attempt here to convert you to an ideology. I want to save you from fear and mistrust and disbelief. In the words of the pastor who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, "We must pay greater attention to the stories of the gospel we have heard." "Take care brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart." "Let us hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope." "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." "Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds."

I'm asking us to trust the stories of the feeding of the 100. And the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000. God keeps providing bread for the journey, wine for the trips up the mountain.

The Elisha stories have one last incredulous event for us. The spirit of Elisha is so great that after his death, they threw another dead body into his grave with his body, and that one came alive when it touched the dead bones of Elisha. Those were some powerful bones. "Can these bones live?" a later prophet would ask. Gospel writers will exhaust the possibilities of human language when they try to describe what happens to a dead Jesus in a grave for three days. Then the Spirit of life, the spirit that sustained Jesus in his earthly life, the Spirit of creation, raised Jesus from the dead.

Read theologically we see the release of power for life in a world weary with the gap between creditors and debtors, rich and poor, exhausted with a faith in secular politics and the rivers of Damascus, despairing in the face of death and fed up with so many little children to feed and not enough bread.

God wants us to know that life overcomes death, that abundance exceeds scarcity, and that God's Spirit enters actual, real, material human needs. What is the last really big thing that you decided to do in the name of Jesus that exceeded your imagination, that went beyond your rational belief, and made you say, "We can't afford this?" "What is this among so many?" "Not even six months of wages would feed this crowd." "We don't have enough bread." When will you say, "I trust God will provide." God will provide. I trust the stories enough to live with "God will provide" as my credo, my guiding light, my ultimate decision-making statement. I trust the promises and power of God.

What about you? Will the church be filled with this life-giving, generous, abundant, need-meeting, peace-making Spirit? Will we be possessed with the Spirit? I await your deliberations and your decisions. Just know that everything hangs on the way you decide to go and the way you decide to live.