

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 27 – Year B

RCL Readings – I Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

ACNA Readings – I Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.

Common Theme. We sometimes make religion and faith more complicated than it should be. We can end up spending a great deal of time and effort fine-tuning our dogmas, liturgies, or worship services—all of which can be good and very important but also sometimes distracting. An honest and humble walk with the Lord shows itself in simple, practical ways. James says that pure and undefiled religion is taking care of orphans and widows (Jas 1:27). Widows feature prominently in our readings and their humble economic status has much to teach us.

Hebraic Context. Thomas Jefferson is attributed as saying “the measure of a society is how it treats the weakest members”. Widows and orphans, who lacked a husband or father to provide for and defend them, constituted some of the poorest members of society in antiquity. If a society were unrestrained by laws or had a survival of the fittest mentality then these vulnerable members of the community would be open to abuse and suffering. The Hebrew Scriptures provided numerous injunctions for the provision and welfare of widows and orphans as well as examples of care by both God and man.

In Exodus 22:22-23 the Lord commanded His people “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry.” Should a man die without issue then a male relative was to marry the widow, provide financially for her, and produce children who would continue the family line but also care for the woman, particularly in her old age. Only the high priest was forbidden from marrying a widow. This rare prohibition is the exception that proves the rule that the heart of God is concerned for the lonely, defenseless, and marginalized.

Those who took care of the widows and orphans were held in high regard. For instance Job, in defending himself to his friends and to the Lord and protesting his innocence, said, “I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy.” (Job 29:12-13) The innocent never cried out to the Lord due to Job’s action except in joy.

The sages also applied a verse from the “woman of valour” (אִשֶּׁת חַיִּיל, *eshet hayil*) prayer said every Shabbat in Proverbs 31:20 “her hands are stretched out to the needy” to the widow of

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Zeraphath as she fed Elijah who was in need—although she herself was just as needy. For the Jewish sages there is always a blessing which comes from a generous spirit. When the poor give out of their poverty, their generosity is a true sign of obedience and faith. Unfortunately, after taking Elijah into her home the son of the widow fell ill and died. Resurrection from the dead is rare in the Scriptures, but the resurrection of the widow's son was also a sign that God cared for the widow and the orphan

This is true religion: to be generous as God has been generous; to show hospitality not just in great wealth but also from poverty; to be gracious and merciful to foreigners, strangers, and even enemies; to care for the widow and orphan.

I Kings 17:8-16. Elijah stood before Ahab and declared, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”¹ Famines in the Scriptures were often linked to the morality and disobedience of the people of Israel. Israel had just had a succession of evil kings who chose not to follow the Lord. Elijah was called by God to challenge the idolatry and wickedness of Ahab and those whom he had led astray and give them a chance to declare that the LORD was their God and they His people. However, many did not turn from their idolatry and sins.

This judgment would not only fall on Ahab, all Israel would suffer—including Elijah. But even beyond Israel, Jezebel of Phoenicia as well as her people would also suffer. Israel had a trade agreement with Phoenicia in which they traded their excess agriculture to Phoenicia for Phoenician expertise and trade goods.² Suddenly Israel had no excess food to sell to the Phoenicians and, beyond that, the famine itself seems to have affected Phoenicia as there wasn't enough local food to feed a widow and her son despite all their international trade connections.^{3 4}

¹ Little is known about Elijah. He was given neither lineage nor profession. The only thing of interest spoken of Elijah's background was that he was somewhat of an outsider, coming from Tishbe of Gilead—likely across the Jordan river.

² I Kings 5:8-12. See also Anson Rainey, *The Sacred Bridge* pg. 198, “Omri, as ruler of an inland state, was planning to become the chief outlet for Arabian products to the Phoenician coast. He would also provide foodstuffs for the Phoenician maritime population, thus obtaining a market for his agricultural surpluses.”

³ Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 26.4 spoke of the famine in the time of Abraham as the first Biblical famine in the world. It was said to only happen in the land of Canaan in order to test Abraham, who went down to Egypt. However, later famines, such as in the time of Joseph, not only affected Canaan but also Egypt. Here, we see that the famine in the days of Ahab not only affected Israel but also Phoenicia.

⁴ Phoenicia, although a maritime culture and an importer of agricultural goods, did produce some of their own agriculture. However, one study from Tell el-Burak (modern Lebanon) shortly after the time of Ahab showed that the majority of the agriculture was grapes at 41.7% (as Phoenician wine was exported throughout the Mediterranean world) while cereals and legumes were only 33.8% and 14.1% of the remains studied. (Andrea Orendi, Katleen Deckers, *Agricultural resources on the coastal plain of Sidon during the Late Iron Age: archaeobotanical investigations at Phoenician Tell el-Burak, Lebanon*)

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In this time, God informed Elijah, who had been miraculously cared for by ravens, that he should travel north to the land of his greatest enemies and be cared for by a widow (who was most likely herself a gentile).⁵ Elijah wasn’t told how the widow would provide for him, widows weren’t known for having great wealth, but perhaps she would be a wealthy recipient of her late husband’s resources.

The widow, we discover, was indeed poor and in the process of gathering wood to prepare what she presumed to be the last meal for herself and her son. When Elijah encountered the widow, he made a bold request for assistance. At first, Elijah’s request was something she was able to easily provide—a little water. She immediately went to serve this Israelite who, unknown to her, was the very cause of her distress. When he continued by asking for bread, she explained her own situation—a quickly approaching death for herself and her son through starvation. But, even in her poverty, she shared what meagre resources she had with the prophet—even giving him the first portion.

Both Elijah and the widow had to choose to trust God in difficult circumstances. Elijah had to trust the Lord to go north to a predominantly Gentile region and be provided for by a poor widow. The widow had to take a risk and trust the promises of a strange prophet and the God of Israel. When they obeyed, God kept His promise to them—a jug of olive oil that never became empty and a jar of flour that was never spent until the rains came once again on the land.⁶

Psalm 146.⁷ After declaring their intention to praise God as long as they live, the authors of Psalm 146 compared two powerful agents on earth. The first are the princes. They may be the wealthy or great people in our society. There is a tendency to have greater respect for those with wealth and people in positions of power than we ought to. Our presidents, kings, and governors are, in reality, men of flesh like ourselves. In the end they will all disappoint and their

⁵ While the text doesn’t state it outright, Jesus, in Luke 4:26 spoke about the widow of Zarepheth in light of being different from the widows of Israel. There is also no mention of her being an Israelite and she called God “The LORD your God” rather than as Ruth (another gentile widow), “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

⁶ God cares about His promises and will be faithful in fulfilling them. However, it is also important to know that God makes promises that are for specific people in specific places and times—this promise was specifically to Elijah and the widow. Nonetheless, God has made other promises to us that He will also be faithful in keeping.

⁷ The word ‘*Hallelujah*’ הללויה is an imperative to ‘Praise the Lord’ and the word stands at the beginning of eleven psalms: 106, 111-113, 117, 135, 146-150. *Hallelujah* is also the final word of twelve psalms: 104-106, 113, 115-116, 135, 146-150. Psalm 146-150 don’t have an ascribed author, although it’s possible that they were written or used by Levitical worship leaders in the Temple. The Septuagint believed that Haggai and Zechariah were the authors of Psalm 146-148.

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endeavours, no matter how well intentioned, will all come to a close.⁸ Obviously our faith should be in something that endures longer than the lifespan of a monarch or a short lived parliamentary term.⁹ Our trust and hope should be in the eternal Lord. And it is to Him that we should profess our love and loyalty.

The psalmist proceeded to bring evidence of God's goodness and creative power. God made the heavens and the earth. He is thus supremely powerful who can exercise his dominion in ways mortals cannot. The Lord's use of His power is for truth and justice. God provides food and sustains all His creatures that He called into being. The Lord is able to do the things that our modern elites and intellectuals promise to do but inevitably fail to deliver. God rescues the captives and heals the sick. It is the Lord, not a philosophy or government of man, who cares for the widows and orphans—the ones at the bottom of the socioeconomic levels.¹⁰ And as opposed to the great and renowned of the earth, the Lord will live and reign forever. If there is anyone worthy of our allegiance with oaths of loyalty, then surely it is only the Lord.

In describing the reasons to trust the eternal God over frail human leadership, the psalmist incorporates a lot of the redemptive imagery of God, perhaps sourced from Deuteronomy 10:12-21. This redemptive imagery became messianic in nature, particularly in Isaiah. Certainly both Psalm 146:7-8 and Isaiah 61:1-2 seem to speak of a great time of God's redemption that comes to fruition in Luke 4:18-19. But Deuteronomy made it clear that these redemptive actions were also commanded for God's people to partake.

Hebrews 9:24-28. There is a rhythm and a cycle to the Jewish and Christian calendar. The feasts of the Lord were a yearly (or weekly) reminder of God's grace, mercy, redemption, power, and judgment. Jesus and the disciples participated in these feasts and Jesus even stated that

⁸ Sometimes we absolutely do not trust people in leadership but we can actually fall into the same trap of looking at them in fear, disgust, or occasional hope. They are still mere men and women. We should still look to worship God as long as we live—even as our fight is not against “flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

⁹ Many of the great Biblical characters were men and women of wealth. Wealth is not inherently an evil thing and can be a blessing from God. These people of faith were also often generous. Having someone generous with financial means to help us can offer a sense of security. But history shows, even in the Bible, that a king who followed God may be followed by an evil king and all the good they intended would be undone or used for evil. We are dust and to dust we will return. Psalm 146:3 poetically uses the term בן אדם (ben adam) for human beings and then immediately states that we will return to our own אדמה (adama) when we die.

¹⁰ And if we are praising the LORD with our whole being then we too will be serving the widow, the orphans, and the stranger. We too will be healing the blind. Otherwise, we are simply singing words. While we may be simple human beings who are on earth for a finite time, it doesn't mean we shouldn't be generous. To sing praises to God without following in His ways will surely have Him declaring that we are wicked shepherds He will purposely bring to ruin.

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He would once again celebrate Passover with His disciples “in my Father’s kingdom”. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross would not replace the desire or goodness of celebrating God’s historical redemption of Israel from out of Egypt.

The yearly cycle with this rhythm of convocations, prayers, and reading of Scripture provides continuity and a solid foundation in an uncertain world. It also reveals how continual sacrifices, while helpful, are not the permanent solution. The author of Hebrews wrote of Jesus coming only once.¹¹ He also only died once and, unlike the sacrifices of the High Priest, Jesus did not have to make additional sacrifices.¹² However, lest we forget, the sacrifice and death of Jesus would not have been efficacious without the resurrection.¹³

The author of Hebrews also wanted to highlight the ascension of Jesus, who once alive entered the Holy Place in heaven. The resurrection proves Jesus to be the Messiah and proves God to be true to His word; the ascension places Jesus now in the role of permanent High Priest in heaven. His one-time sacrifice of himself was made here on earth, but His continuing work as mediator in heaven is ongoing.

Having shown that the Messiah will not have to come back to bring further sacrifices to put away sin, the return of the Messiah will not deal with sin again—at least not for the forgiveness of sins, that aspect of the divine promise has been fulfilled and dealt with. Thus the second coming will

¹¹ Many translations interpret *ἅπαξ* (*hapax*) as “once for all”. However, *ἅπαξ* is simply the term for once in all Greek texts written in the period of the Apostles:

Strabo’s *Geography* 1.2.18 “Ulysses, though he journeyed thrice to Sicily, he never once navigated the Strait...”

Strabo’s *Geography* 3.5.8, “how comes it that the Gaditanians are not competent to observe what is of daily occurrence, while they are nevertheless competent to the observing of revolutions which occur but once in the year.”

Josephus’ *War of the Jews* 2.354, “But as for war, if it be once begun, it is not easily laid down again, nor borne without calamities coming therewith.”

Josephus’ *War of the Jews* 2.495, “for the Jews got together, and set those that were the best armed among them in the forefront, and made a resistance for a great while; but when once they gave back, they were destroyed unmercifully;”

While the term *ἐφ᾽ ἅπαξ* (*ephapax*) is harder to translate as it is found so rarely in Greek texts, its use in I Corinthians 15:6 also makes it relatively clear that the word should not create a theological doctrine of “once for all”. While this interpretation for both *ἅπαξ* and *ἐφ᾽ ἅπαξ* can be helpful (the author is clearly stating that Jesus did not have to come to sacrifice Himself every year or in every generation), it can also be easily misunderstood. Today, many people assume that the term itself means “once for all...people” or “once for all... time” to the exclusion of anything done before or after it rather than more efficacious, as the author of Hebrews continuously argued.

¹² Although Jesus would have brought sacrifices to the Temple when He came to Jerusalem every year. Sacrifice, though not efficacious in the way that Jesus’ sacrifice put away sin, can still be pleasing to God if accompanied with obedience in serving the widow, the stranger, and the orphan.

¹³ See I Corinthians 15:12-28

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not have the same reconciliation-forgiveness character of His first appearance but will bring judgment as well as salvation and rescue from the injustices of this broken world to those who early await Him.

The author of Hebrews writes about our eagerness for the Messiah's return. Maintaining a sense of eagerness and expectation is not always easy amongst the pressures and responsibilities of day-to-day life. Many of our liturgies contain the words, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' so that the expectation of our Redeemer and King is never far from our devotion to the Lord.

Mark 12:38-44. Jesus sharply and openly rebuked the Biblical scholars of His day for their hypocrisy. The scribes were custodians of the Scriptures and were entrusted to learn, preserve, and teach the Word of the Lord to the people of God.¹⁴ This incredible job should have been humbling and an awe-inspiring task for the scribes.

The Torah should have taught these scribes God's concern for the poor, the stranger, and the widow. It should have taught them humility and dependence on God and to walk in the way of God. Instead, these teachers (who should have been interceding on behalf of the poor and the widow) became hypocrites more obsessed with their own self-importance and seeking all the perks of their status in the community. Jesus stated that they oppressed those they should have blessed and supported. Jesus warned against the sorts of scribes and teachers who parade themselves in fine clothing, say long-winded prayers to display their piety, and are so greedy as to seize the resources of the truly needy.¹⁵

Both Mark and Luke chose to immediately contrast this hypocrisy with a widow's true humility and devotion. The widow loved the Lord with all that she possessed, even if that wasn't much. She showed the practical result of someone who loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength. While the scribes may have prayed loudly and often, gone to all the readings of Scripture in the synagogue, and attended the feasts that God had commanded the people of Israel that they might remember (and obey) Him, if they never obeyed the two greatest

¹⁴ Scribes, γραμματεὺς (grammateus), were often used as intermediary messengers. Sometimes they went from kings to priests or governors or vice-versa (Isaiah 37:1-7, II Kings 22:3-20 and II Chronicles 34:14-22, Ezra 4:7-10, or Polybius *Histories* 18.1) but they also served as a witness or speaker between the people and judges or prophets (Numbers 11:16, Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 7.363-364, and Deuteronomy 20:5-9). In the Scriptures, the scribes served in one additional capacity, they served as intermediaries between the word of God and the people of God. In this capacity, Ezra was the most famous of the scribes (Nehemiah 8:1-18, Ezra 10:1-17).

¹⁵ Jesus wasn't condemning all scribes, in fact, Jesus had just had a positive conversation with a scribe in Mark 12:28-34. Rather, Jesus condemned those scribes who took from the widow rather than interceded on their behalf. For teachers today, the same should be said. There is a reason James said, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

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commandments they would receive great condemnation. It wasn't that many of the scribes didn't follow the spirit of the Law, they had abandoned the whole letter of the law—they neither loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might nor did they love their neighbour (in fact, they took advantage of them).

God observes both our heart and our actions. Jesus commended the widow for her spirit of giving. God does not need our money; He commands us to serve others.¹⁶ Whether we have only a little or we have been blessed with abundance, we are to obey our God. Is it truly harder for a widow to give the last of her money in thanksgiving and obedience than those of us who don't need to worry about literal starvation to love God with all our might?¹⁷

Hebraic Perspective. God is known by many names and titles in the Scriptures. He has His unpronounceable, private name YHWH which He revealed to Moses on the mountain of God in Exodus 3:13-15.¹⁸ However, God used the same letters as the name He provided Moses to state, "I will be with you." (Exodus 3:12) The more common name for the Lord in Scripture is *Elohim* simply translated as God.

Most of God's names and titles reflect His character or some aspect of His being. In the psalm for today we read; "Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God" (Psalm 146:5). Here the Lord is addressed as the God of Jacob. The phrase "God of Jacob" occurs at least 14 times in Scripture. Why would the Lord choose to attach His name and character to that of Jacob?

When thinking of Jacob in Scripture we encounter a deceiver, a usurper, and a coward. He tricked his father to gain his brother Esau's blessing and, when the action was discovered, he fled instead of facing his problems. When returning back to Canaan he heard that Esau was

¹⁶ God does not need our money, but He did promise that He would give the Levite and priest food (Numbers 18:23-24; Deuteronomy 14:27, 18:1-2) and He was very displeased when the priests weren't given what God had promised they would have (Joel 1:8-10). In Psalm 132:15, God promised that He would feed the poor of Zion with bread. If they have need of bread and I do not provide for them, surely God will be angry at me for breaking His promise. If we aren't called to be a nurse or doctor to heal the sick, there are many hospitals around the world that can hardly function due to a lack of funding. With over 2 billion proclaimed Christians in the world, we should be able to provide food, clothing, families, etc. to the world if we truly cared and then acted in the love God commanded us to have.

¹⁷ The Targum of Onkelos translated Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your possessions [or property]." From this translation we understand that strength, to the hearer in the first century, meant with everything that made you wealthy. To love God with all your strength was to love Him with all your time, money, house, and possessions.

¹⁸ Unpronounceable as there were no vowels and thus it is impossible to know exactly how to pronounce the name.

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coming to meet him with a large company and Jacob sent the woman and children ahead of him with gifts. Not the actions of a strong and fearless hero.

What was it about the character of Jacob that the Lord would delight to proclaim that He is the God of Jacob? It was in the weaknesses of Jacob that the Lord's strength could be more clearly seen. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he said of the Lord that "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) It's a paradox in which God's strength is manifested through the weakness of man.

The Lord can make use of our imperfections and failings. This is not to say that He does not make use of our talents and gifts or that we are free of the obligation to use our talents and abilities for God's kingdom. The church is built on the foundation of faithful, but not perfect, followers of the Lord—we are to obey and serve as best as we are able. But it is His presence that is all we need in times of weakness. The more aware we are of our weakness, the more God can reveal His power through us even as we follow Him.