

FIRST READING: Kings 17:7-16

A reading from the First Book of Kings:

The brook near where Elijah was hiding ran dry because no rain had fallen in the land. So the LORD said to Elijah: "Move on to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have designated a widow there to provide for you." He left and went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the entrance of the city, a widow was gathering sticks there; he called out to her, "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink." She left to get it, and he called out after her, "Please bring along a bit of bread." She answered, "As the LORD, your God, lives, I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first, make me a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and Elijah and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the LORD had foretold through Elijah.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 4:2-3, 4-5, 7b-8

Lord, let your face shine on us.

When I call, answer me, O my just God, you who relieve me when I am in distress; Have pity on me, and hear my prayer! Men of rank, how long will you be dull of heart? Why do you love what is vain and seek after falsehood?

Lord, let your face shine on us.

Know that the LORD does wonders for his faithful one; the LORD will hear me when I call upon him. Tremble, and sin not; reflect, upon your beds, in silence.

Lord, let your face shine on us.

O LORD, let the light of your countenance shine upon us! You put gladness into my heart, more than when grain and wine abound.

Lord, let your face shine on us.

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do

they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Tuesday of the 19th Week of the Year Reflection

Natural disasters like droughts and pandemics have plagued humanity from the earliest times. Sin has been at the heart of humanity since our origin as human beings. The story from 1 Kings is no exception. Ahab was King of Israel, the northern kingdom. Elijah the prophet tried to change the ways of Ahab, who allowed the worship of pagan gods in Israel. To punish Ahab, God sent a multi-year drought upon the kingdom, its crops, animals, and people. God punished everyone and everything for the sins of one man.

I have always had trouble with this kind of punishment. I am a product of Catholic education from first grade until I received my master's degree. That was twenty years. I never really enjoyed grammar school because an entire class would be punished for the actions of a few. The teachers thought that peer pressure would change the ones who acted out. What happened? Instead of putting pressure on my peers, I came to resent the teacher for being unfair. Today this is still my knee-jerk reaction to situations like these.

God seems like a dysfunctional parent in stories like these. I always have to take a step back and take another look. Bad things always have happened. In today's story, the weakness of human nature and the power and randomness of natural catastrophe converge in what seems to be a convenient quid-pro-quo. A three-year drought was terrible. Did it have a reason? Was the reason Ahab's sins? Was God punishing people for some reason? What is this story about?

People asked why these things happen. This is human nature. We seek reasons for pain and suffering. Personally, I prefer to seek God's presence not in causality but in companionship. God gave people what they needed to cope with the drought. That is what the story of Elijah, the widow, and her son is really about. God is a God of mercy, not malice. For the duration of the drought, God kept the three of them fed.

We have been on lock-down since mid-March because of a global pandemic. World-wide 6,800,000 people have been infected with the COVID 19 to date. The numbers continue to rise. Over the weekend, in Illinois alone, the numbers have increased by about 18,000. 397,000 have died of it, so far, worldwide. It is difficult to grasp the extent of those lives affected. There is no effective treatment and no viable vaccine for this horrible disease. Since this is a new virus we all face, we have no resistance to it. If we do not adhere to strict social distancing, many more will become infected and many more will die. COVID 19 will not go away.

If this were not enough, Fallen, human nature is active too. A black man died with a policeman's knee on his neck as he lay face down in the street. I have worked in African American and Latino parishes. I have heard what is known as "The Talk." Parents and elders of young kids tell

them the proper way to protect themselves if stopped by police. Some of my Latino and African American friends have experienced such things. They weren't gang bangers or involved with anything criminal but by the fact that they were who they were. My expectation of fair treatment was not theirs. Nature and human nature have converged in our lives today.

Is this God's wrath and punishment? If it is, Jesus died for no reason. Does the covenant of the cross exist? Could the gospel proclaim bad news? Where is God? To express these thoughts is to lay these feelings bare before God. To do so is not a sign of defiance against God but a profound prayer raised from the depths of people in need of healing. I always point out Psalm 22 and the tradition of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The former prays, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" This was Jesus' dying prayer prayed on the cross. The elder Simeon foretold that Mary, "A sword will pierce your soul too—so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare." For some, these kinds of experiences may drive them further from God. They expect a miraculous intervention by God to change reality. God's actions are far more subtle for God works through us. The numbers of those infected have not been geometric because we have acted for the common good in staying home. People may have finally witnessed what they needed to understand what people of color face. Sadly we all watched a man die.

It is always easier to see the misdeeds of others. It is harder to face our own. I am always impressed with the way St. Paul prayed for sinners. He included the line, of whom I am the first; the first being the first sinner. The challenge for each of us is to know that in the eyes of God we are responsible for no one else's sin. We are responsible to God for our own. When we seek justice we seek God's justice not our own. Our own justice has revenge or punishment at its heart. God's justice is forgiveness. Forgiveness is the purpose of the cross. Jesus died for our forgiveness. God, who is love, offers us love unconditionally. When each of us approaches God for justice is it for punishment or forgiveness? God welcomes sinners into his arms.

Our response to fellow sinners is forgiveness too. We pray in the Our Father, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. What does forgiveness mean? It means to release the anger and outrage. It is to remember that as God forgives us, we can share God's gift. Forgiveness does not mean that what's wrong is now right. Sin is always sin. When we forgive and become forgiven we can live anew. Killing someone is always wrong. Racism and prejudice are always wrong. Violence and looting are always wrong. Expressing outrage at these things is necessary. Having compassion for fellow sinners is the way we live our faith in Jesus. We entrust ourselves and the rest of the world's sinners into God's mercy to be forgiven and healed.

"You are the salt of the earth." What does that mean? Usually, we think it means that people are useful but commonplace. Table salt never becomes un-salty. Much of our table salt comes from salt mines where it has remained for millions of years. The ancient Central American Natives could never understand the Spaniards' desire for gold. They valued salt. Gold looks pretty but will never save one's life. We all need salt to live. Our blood is as salty as is the ocean. When Jesus said what he did, he meant, "You are valuable and necessary for life." There is a context where salt can lose its nature. The ancient people of Jesus' time lived in the desert and didn't have a lot of resources for cooking fuel. Wood was valuable for building. They didn't

have natural gas or electricity. Coal was rare. They used a renewable resource, dung. It was collected, mixed with grass or straw to bind it and dried. For dung to burn it needs a catalyst. The catalyst was a block of salt. The oven had a block of salt as its floor. The dried dung was placed on the salt. It would then burn strongly and evenly as a fuel. However, the chemistry of salt would change over time and the block would be replaced with a new one. The old one to be thrown out and trampled underfoot for it would no longer be salt. Our saltiness and I don't mean bad language, our specialness is our witness to the faith which gives glory to God.

The world around us may fall apart. The deeds of others may be deplorable. Our lives can show the love we have of God, ourselves, and one another.

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