**LAGOM**

June 5, 2016

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24)

Psalm 146

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 7:11-17

**"A year's supply of taco shells!"** The 35th caller to the local radio station and the first runner-up on your grandma's favorite game show are told that they've been blessed with a guaranteed abundance of some essential household supply or an obviously awesome dessert. The initial response from both the recipient of the prize and from the onlookers is one of celebration, but is quickly replaced with obvious questions like "How much is a year's supply anyway?" And, most important, "What do you do with *all those* taco shells?" "Just how much is a year's supply anyway?" As it turns out, no one really knows, which means the recipient could be out of luck and underwhelmed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But, as it turns out, that "year's supply" may not be the guarantee of abundance one assumes it is. Since it's up to the company supplying the prize to determine just what constitutes a "year's supply" there's no guarantee that what's given would last the average consumer 52 days, let alone 52 weeks. Sure, the law requires that those doling out such promises outline up front just what said supply entails and that each promise pass a "reasonable test"-- meaning that any reasonable customer would agree that they could make 50 packs of Oreos last 12 months or down 138 Ortega taco shells in 365 days.

But the point is that such promises are inherently subjective -- *subject to the definition of what's "enough" on the part of the one supplying and what's "needed" on the part of the one receiving*. When Ben and Jerry's promises 52 pints of Chunky Monkey, the typical family of three might say, "Perfect!" However, the single young woman with a craving for chocolate and a boyfriend who just dumped her may think, "Great, but what am I supposed to eat next week?" When such guarantees are given, the odds are high that either someone will be stuck with an abundance of stuff that fails to meet any real needs, or that it'll be far less than what they want and expected.

Enter the widow of Zarephath, who gets all she needs, including all the dough and oil necessary to bake taco shells and flatbread for months to keep her son and herself, plus a bizarre and strange prophet, alive against all odds.

In 1 Kings we encounter the prophet Elijah wandering through a world, reeling from the aftereffects of broken promises. The context is a land and a people that are devoted to the worship of Baal. Baal is a false god of sorts whose proponents attract followers by selling the god as a kind of insanely generous game show host. And people played his games because of the great prizes he guaranteed, typically an endless supply of fertile ground for growing crops and fertile wombs for growing families. You know, exactly what ancient peoples, struggling for survival wanted to hear and needed to have.

But even the best of false gods, like false promises runs out of favor eventually. Why? Well, if you're a god who doesn't actually exist, it's very difficult to keep your promises. Thus, Elijah finds himself wandering in a world where, despite the promises of Baal, a drought is causing devastating damage. It's a drought that Elijah himself predicted and that is seen by the prophet as judgment against those who fell for such promises in the first place and a proof that Baal worship is a bust.

The rug of credibility having been pulled out from under Baal, meant that it was now time to begin proving just whose promises could be trusted and whose ability to supply that which is needed is truly unlimited. "'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks." (1 Kings 17:9-10)

So you think your life stinks? Consider Elijah’s life situation at this point in time:

• The king of Israel is his enemy.
• The wicked queen hates his guts.
• He’s on the run from the law.
• God sends him into enemy territory in Zarephath.
• For food, he’s at the mercy of the poorest of the poor.

Commanded by God, Elijah headed deep into Baal country to seek food from a widow. He's told she will be easy to find. Find her he does, but this widow and her child are starving -- about to eat a final meal of boiled twigs.

As I read about this the thought went through my mind that “even spam might be better than twigs.” Then I began to realize that would be confusing. You say “spam” to the last couple of generations and all they can consider is “junk mail” in their “email account.” Some of us who are older know a bit more about the origins of the connection between spam as computer junk mail and Spam the ubiquitous canned meat.

Some connect it to the famous Monty Python restaurant sketch in which the menu consists of such repetitious delicacies such as “spam spam spam egg and spam; spam spam spam spam spam spam baked beans spam spam spam.” Computer spam is just a similar menu of repetitive, tasteless junk. Others, though, trace the origin of the term to a computer lab at USC, where the students began to compare computer junk mail with the stuff that comes in a can because:

1. Nobody wants it or ever asks for it.
2. No one ever eats it; it’s the first item to be pushed to the side when eating the entree.
3. Sometimes it’s actually tasty, like the one percent of junk mail that’s really useful to a few people.

But while computer spam is the stuff of our everyday lives, the original Spam gets a lot less press these days. In the 1930s in the USA, Spam wasn’t a joke but a diet staple. Spam was developed when Jay Hormel noticed that the perfectly good — but not necessarily desirable — pork-shoulder meat was going to waste at his meat-packing plant. He came up with the idea of processing that meat with a little ham, squeezing it into a can and selling it as an affordable meat for a financially strapped populace. The name “Spam” was the winning entry in a nationwide contest, but the etymology is still a subject of debate. It was either a combination of “spiced ham” or “shoulder of pork and ham.” At any rate, Spam became a regular feature on the tables in many Depression-era homes.

**ODE TO SPAM**

Oh, Spam! Oh, Spam! Gourmet delight!
My food by day, my dreams by night.
To carve, to slice, to dice you up —
pureed in a blender and sipped from a cup.
What shining deity from Olympus knelt
down to the earth and hog butt smelt?
Creating then man’s eternal desire
for swine entrails congealed by fire.
On some corporate farm, a pig has died.
Eyes, tongue and snout end up inside
that cube of Spam hidden in the can
I now hold in my trembling hand.

But this widow and her son were now down to twigs. They did not have abundance and they did not even have “enough.” For them the endless supply promised by Baal has come up cruelly, tragically short. However, while Elijah's arrival and request for food from this starving, single mom sounds at first as though God simply wants to rub this woman's nose in her idolatry, that's is not the case. God, through Elijah, is granted this woman the gift of discovering the source of genuine abundance; the gift of knowing just who it is that has the ability to readily deliver what's truly needed rather than just recklessly making promises that are false.

The widow is asked by Elijah to make him dinner. Elijah assures her that he knows the one true God, and that if she does this, God will ensure that her supplies last and she stays alive. Living in the aftermath of Baal's broken promises, the widow must have found it hard to swallow Elijah's guarantee. Perhaps she'd become jaded and closed off to the idea of a caring deity. Maybe she had become skeptical and sarcastic, rolling her eyes and refusing to trust in anything that sounded too good to be true. Who could blame her? But still, Elijah asked.

We still live in a world full of "Baal" -- a world full of false gods promising endless supply. He comes in different forms these days.

He comes in the form of a career promising a lasting sense of success and total security, so long as you lay inappropriate amounts of time and devotion upon the altar.

He comes in the form of Botox injections, laser hair removal, the newest iPhone and the latest trends each subtly promising, in their own ways, the gift of personal relevance and perpetual youth and speed.

He comes in the form of philosophies taught by an adjunct professor of philosophy professor at the college your son attends. The instruction contains ideas that promises enlightenment and self-actualization minus any belief in a light-giver, and the value of boundaries and constraints. It's an intriguing idea -- until you realize that if there's no room for the divine, *ipso facto*, there's also no room or basis for ultimate meaning and morality and purpose.

He comes in the form of Powerball lotteries giving away hundreds of millions and reality television offering fame to the masses. But to enjoy either you have to avert your eyes from the truth that few who play ever win and even those who win kind of lose.  This is the Baal that rears its head when political campaigns are in full swing. There will be promises of jobs and walls, education and new bridges, infrastructure and lower taxes, fairness and security. We know truthfully that despite the stump speeches, what is genuinely needed is cooperation and wisdom, compromise and transparency, truthfulness and shared vision.

Baal is alive -- still fake -- but alive. The essential premise, however, is that we tend to bow down, duped by the promise of endless supply, failing to realize that what Baal offers is never enough and what Baal gives is not what we need, and that there are billions of others tasting the drought. Billions who, like the widow with Elijah, are feeling the effects of empty promises, suffering through unsatisfactory supply, and are skeptical that any more "god-sent guarantees" are not worth trusting.

Does this description fit anyone you know?

But most of us hope that at some point in worship there will be good news. Perhaps this is a helpful offering, “Just because some gods fail doesn’t mean there is no God at all.” Just because some promises fall short doesn't mean that all promises are garbage. There is One who offers a lifetime supply of stuff you really need. Elijah popped up in Zarephath to prove this to the widow and demonstrate it for the world.

The true, "giving" God was making himself known -- through prophets like Elijah -- and in full, in person through his Son Jesus Christ. Maybe as we were reading this you took note of the similarities between Elijah's encounter with the widow and Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. Elijah told the widow to take him at his word -- to trust in the God who sent him -- and that she'll have food for days. Jesus told the Samaritan woman likewise to bring him water, and he then offered that "whoever drinks of the water I give will never be thirsty again" (John 4:13). (a little different from Luke)

Maybe you saw the similarity in this morning’s gospel reading and the Old Testament Lesson. Jesus had gone to the town of Nain and was greeted with a man be carried out through the gate, an only son of a widow. He touched the bier and commanded the man to rise. It was an astonishing event where this woman was granted something she could only imagine and all were stunned at the compassion of Jesus. Apparently some became afraid of the power of God that was exposed by what people quickly determined was a prophet. Yes, many of us have stood by a bedside, and prayed for a little more, a little longer. We have then wondered about whether or not our faith was false or our God.

Sometimes we have reflected and thought that it was enough. That is an interesting word in the presence of a world that always wants more. Enough! The Swedish word for it is Lagom.

Rev. Laurel Nelson loves to cook and garden, so she supervises the gardening, landscaping, and meal preparation at Lagom Landing. Laurel grew up in Colorado loves hiking and training for triathlons and in 2003 was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be a pastor and she is a member of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. However, she met Rock Castor, her husband, and the two of them have developed a ministry at Lagom Landing.

Both Rock and Laurel benefited from “gap years” of their own earlier in their lives. Rock, not knowing what he wanted to do when he graduated from high school, went to Papua New Guinea as a volunteer for the Highland Christian Mission. He was exposed to gravity-flow water systems and simple pole construction, and within six months was writing home, “I’ve figured out what I want to do!”

When Rock and Laurel met, they both talked of creating a place where young adults could learn hands on skills and, at the same time, discover who they are and how they are to be in the world. The dream grew and matured as they fell in love and married.

With the sale of some land from a farm settled by Laurel’s Swedish ancestors in Colorado, Laurel and Rock were given the seed money for Lagom Landing. They purchased sixty acres of land north of Dansville, NY in the Town of Sparta, NY. They provide a gap year, a year away for students who wonder what God has in store for them. During the year, they develop community, learn construction and agricultural skills, and spend time developing spiritual awareness.

Their program was named Lagom Landing to honor the blessing of the Swedish ancestors who courageously headed into a new land in Colorado. Conscious of the biblical admonition against hoarding, Rock and Laurel continue to want to share what they’ve been given, and the word “[Lagom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagom)” sums up this desire. The word Lagom means, “enough.” At Lagom Landing young adults are taught to be satisfied with “enough.”

Elijah didn’t fill the widow’s barn with grain and oil to rival the Pharoahs. There was enough for each day. But, most of us aren’t very satisfied with “enough” and so we turn to our own Baal Gods rather than one who abundantly provides “enough.”

The premise and suggestion here is simple but requires a leap of faith. We are asked to shift our focus from the Baal-promises of this world that have so often proven to be empty, to the God of Elijah, to Yahweh himself, to Jesus the Christ who has demonstrated faithfulness. And if you do, God will provide and deeply satisfy!

Sensing this may be true and having reached a place of beautiful hopelessness -- no longer holding on to empty and unsubstantiated wishes -- the widow takes Elijah at his word. She uses the last of her supply of meal to demonstrate her trust in the providence of this man's God. And it pays off. There is bread for weeks. The small amount of oil is not depleted. The God Elijah worships is vindicated. Baal is proven a chump. The widow and baby have full bellies, but most importantly they now have rightly focused, faith-filled hearts. They now know where to look and just whom to trust for actual abundance and an endless supply.

Maybe you have been jaded and are skeptical. You may very well be walking around burned and scarred by the game-show-style promises of false gods. If that's you -- one day, when that's you – rather than giving up, prep your last meal. Turn to the God who has promised to supply enough. Ask if God loves you and see if God doesn't show you the cross. Ponder God's power and see if God doesn't remind you of the empty tomb. Beg God for wisdom and see what comes from God’s word. Bake the last of what you have and see if God doesn't come through."

It's the protypical not-so-grand "grand prize," isn't it? The 238th caller is told that she's won a lifetime supply. Of pickles. She was hoping for a car. The world writes checks it can't cash. Baal makes promises Baal can't keep. Baal offers stuff that doesn't satisfy.

No, Jesus doesn't promise us everything we want. But neither will he ever run out of what we truly need. That's why he tells us this in John 14. "I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). That's a good thing. The world gives taco shells. He gives life.

May we run from Baal, bake our cakes, and believe. Amen.

**Commentary**

The story of Elijah's residing with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16) is the second miracle story associated with one of Israel's most famous early prophets. It is the shorter option suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary; the longer reading includes the third miracle story concerning Elijah, his resuscitation of the widow's son (vv. 17-24). Variations on both of these stories are also preserved about Elijah's successor, Elisha (2 Kings 4:1-7, 8-37).

The context of today's story has been briefly sketched by the writer or redactor of Kings in the first seven verses of chapter 17, which introduce Elijah to the pages of the Bible. Elijah has confronted King Ahab with the prediction of a severe drought in (the northern kingdom of) Israel because of Ahab's introduction of the cult of the Canaanite fertility god Baal into Israel following Ahab's political marriage to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess (1 Kings 16:31-33). Elijah fled from the king's presence to the Wadi Cherith, which, being east of the Jordan River, was probably beyond Ahab's jurisdiction. The exact location is unknown and unimportant (although it has traditionally been identified with modern Wadi Yabis); its location "east of the Jordan" (v. 3, repeated in v. 5 for emphasis) is what matters. There, in hiding, Elijah is nourished by ravens at God's command (vv. 4, 6) and drinks from the wadi until it dries up, as Elijah had predicted (v. 7).

Under divine guidance -- that's what "the word of the LORD came to ..." means -- Elijah relocates, this time to the coastal city of Zarephath, approximately 10 miles south of Sidon, eponymous capital of the Sidonians, the Phoenician city-state from which Jezebel had come (although her father, King Ethbaal, was king of Tyre from 878 to 847 B.C.; see Robert R. Stieglitz, "Tyre,"*Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI, 2000], 1342). The modern Lebanese city of Sarafand occupies the location of this biblical site today, which is mentioned here, Obadiah 1:20 (as one of the boundaries of eschatological Israel), and Luke 4:26 (referencing this story). Nothing is said of Elijah's journey from Wadi Cherith to Zarephath, a distance of some 80 miles, a long journey by ancient standards and a route that traversed the northern kingdom of Israel diagonally from its southeast region to beyond its northwest border. Elijah remained, in either location, beyond the reach of King Ahab, and in both non-Israelite places, he was miraculously provided for by the LORD and his nonhuman and human agents.

The narrator wastes no words explaining how the widow knew Elijah's god was Yahweh -- perhaps because of the language or dialect Elijah was speaking -- but she invokes the national deity of Israel in a standard oath formula, *chai yahweh*, "As the LORD lives" (found also at Judges 8:19; Ruth 3:18; 1 Samuel 14:39, 45; and many other places). The force of the oath is rhetorical: "As Yahweh lives" -- with all the hearers understanding that, of course, Yahweh *does* live -- "then what I am about to say is as true as that, so it's very true indeed." The modern idiomatic equivalent would be "I swear to God."

The movement of the narrative takes Elijah from the protective care of wild animals (the ravens) to the protective care of a religious, ethnic and social outsider (the Sidonian widow), and eventually directly to Ahab himself (for a second time; 1 Kings 18:1-2, 17-19). As the prophet moves from the more remote places where faith in the LORD might be unexpected to the more likely of such places, the narrative makes it clear that the opposite, is in fact, the case; instead of being met with respect or care in Ahab's court, this prophet of classical Yahwism is met with rejection and scorn, reinforcing the narrator's judgment that Ahab was an apostate.

The widow's words to Elijah in verse 12 -- "... that we may eat it and die"-- foreshadow the second miraculous experience she is to have with the prophet, namely, the death and resuscitation (not,*pace* the language of some commentators, "resurrection") of her son (vv. 17-24). In their initial meeting, the widow explains to Elijah that she is gathering fuel to prepare what she expects to be her and her son's last meal, but the prophet assures her that if she will provide him first with just "a little cake" (v. 13), neither the supply of meal nor the jug of oil would fail until the LORD ended the drought. The widow -- unlike Elijah's coreligionists -- trusts in Elijah's words, and her faith is rewarded with miraculous sustenance, as Elijah's faith had been earlier.

The second story bears all the hallmarks of an originally independent composition that has been redacted into its current location on the basis of the shared characters of a widow and her son. The widow's reaction to her son's death -- blaming Elijah -- is peculiar, to say the least. The reference to her "sin" (v. 18) suggests a back-story now lost. And the description of Elijah's elaborate healing ritual (vv. 19-21) is in marked contrast to the laconic description -- or nondescription, actually -- of the means by which the supply of meal and jug of oil persisted. These differences in content and tone notwithstanding, the story nonetheless functions as a miraculous authentication for the prophet's words.

Both stories -- the miraculous supply of meal and oil, and the resuscitation of the widow's son -- make several points. First, both stories are meant as authenticating signs that Elijah is a true, rather than a false, prophet (cf. the widow's words in v. 24). In the historical setting depicted in the books of Kings (as well as in other passages), the task of distinguishing true from false prophets was of paramount importance, since prophets wielded the power of life and death (cf. Elijah's summary order for the execution of the prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 18:40).

Second, where faith in the LORD and his prophets might be expected -- Israel's royal court -- what was found instead was rank apostasy. The Deuteronomistic editors of the books of Kings considered the divided monarchy to be the northern kingdom of Israel's secession from the true people of Israel, who were the Judahites centered around the temple in Jerusalem. All of northern Israel's kings, therefore, were considered apostate, some (such as Ahab) worse than others (cf. 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 16:25, 30; 22:51; etc.).

Third, Yahweh's care extends beyond the people of Israel to include those, such as the Sidonian widow, who recognize Yahweh's power even as they adhere to another faith (and nation -- the two were inextricable in the ancient world).

Fourth, Yahweh's power is not confined to geographical Israel. It was the common understanding among ancient people that a deity's power ruled a particular people in a particular area. The notion of an effective universal deity was virtually unheard of prior to the rise of Yahwism, and much of biblical literature reflects the struggle of the people of biblical Israel to grasp the profound ramifications of their own universal faith.

1. "Win a year's supply! What does that really mean?" *Slate.com*, September 10, 2012. [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com/). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)