

15th Sunday after Trinity: September 17, 2023

“What Is One To Do?”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The common theme of many of the news programs I was subjected to this week all had a common theme, which is the same when I look at the fields in the fall, and the stores will be filled with for the next couple of months – death.

What is one to do in the face of death? The Old Testament text is full of precarious and dreadfully perilous situations. Leading up to our Old Testament text, God uses Elijah to tell Ahab there will be no rain, or dew, except by the word of the Lord. This means there will be no moisture to sustain life, and no water to cool the burning tongues. No water meant no life, and no life means death.

After this bold word of death is spoken by Elijah, Elijah is kept alive and sustained by God’s gracious hand, both through God providing water for the brook Cherith, and God sending the ravens to bring Elijah bread and meat.

Months passed with still no water. Life in the dry, dusty climate got harder and harder. New difficulties arose. As relief seemed nowhere in sight, emotions run high, doubt looms heavy, and despair constantly nags. As the body wearily battles in these pained and unsympathetic conditions, the soul is driven ever closer to the edge of anxious turmoil and utter despair. As one looks around the arid ground, one can see death in every baked plant, and demise in every parched inch of ground. As the world around is dying, the soul easily turns into itself, “Well, everything else is dying. I must also.”

This is the situation to which Elijah is sent. There is a widow living in Zarephath. She is in a Gentile country, and somehow, by God’s grace, she has heard the word of the Lord and believed it. It is clear from the text that she does not yet call YHWH her God, but she has heard His Word and knows His messenger is coming. In the midst of death, which seems to be the only thing surrounding her, she believes in the promise of life to come.

The widow of Zarephath is a living example of our Gospel lesson. It would not surprise me to learn that Jesus had this woman in mind as He spoke these words in the Sermon on the Mount, ***“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?... Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”***¹

When Elijah comes to this woman, she is gathering stubble to start a fire to bake bread with what little provisions she has left for her and her son. She doesn't know exactly what will happen after that, but it will more than likely be death.

What is one to do? While death looms, she seems content with this day's daily bread, and leaves tomorrow in the hand of God. If death be her portion after this meal, so be it; it is God's will. She doesn't know when she will die, but she knows that she will die at some time. She knows that in the midst of death God's Word is the only thing that will give life for eternity.

Elijah sees her working in the midst of death in order to die, and he calls to her, ***“Fetch to me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.”*** Now, remember only God's Word is going to provide water, and so Elijah is making the connection for this woman that he is God's servant, sent to her just as God has promised. He doesn't look like much, but what he speaks is life-giving.

Then as she goes to fetch the water, Elijah has another request, ***“Fetch to me a morsel of bread in your hand.”*** What a terrible request! How can this man of God drive such a hard burden upon one who is clearly suffering? Should not Elijah have been serving this woman who is clearly in dire-straits? Is Elijah an egotistical, greedy, obstinate man-child, or is there something else going on here?

¹ Matthew 6:25–34

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you already know the answer, because you too know and sing, ***“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”***²

In the middle of death, where this woman lives, the Word of God is sent to this woman and she recognizes that through this man, the still waters are not only present, but they are given to her. In the middle of the valley of the shadow of death, God’s Word of life is her comfort. The table is to be prepared in the midst of the enemies of death, sin, and the devil, and oil is not running out. Being a guest at this table means a cup that overflows, and now goodness and mercy will be my lot, and in the Lord’s house will be the eternal home of those in Christ.

Faith hears the word of God through the mouth of this strange looking man before her, and it feasts. In fact, ***“she and he and her household ate for many days...according to the word of the Lord.”***³

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there are many things that remind us that death surrounds us on every side. Disease and decay are rampant in our bodies. There is always some illness that fights to capture our attention. Some are sudden and acute, others are chronic and weigh heavily for longer periods of time, sometimes leaving more permanent issues. On top of these things, we even have reminders with something as simple as dry and damaged skin, which is caused by a lack of moisture. We are told over and over, about how important it is to drink water so that the body doesn’t dry out, because dehydration can lead to all sorts of problems, exacerbate others, and even lead to death.

² Psalm 23:1–6

³ 1 Kings 17:15

Of course, the body isn't the only one to feel these effects. Families and relationships experience the realities of death and feel the breakdown of decay. It is constantly being pushed that human life is replaceable by non-human life, that institutions that are good and beneficial are to be met first with a culture of suspicion, and that above all, what is the most important thing to be maintained is the right and freedom to choose anything and everything.

While these seem like great ideals to the world, they cannot even hold up to their own scrutiny. There is nothing long lasting, or even long-seeking to this point of view. When you look at the world's ideas of family, of life, of joy, it is all limited to this world. Because the world does not see the life to come, it can only focus on what it sees and feels. This affects the way they even talk about something as important as faith. When someone talks of faith, of things not perceptible to the eyes, it is met with scorn and ridicule, "Ok, sure, you can have faith if it makes you happy. You can go to church if it makes you happy. But if it doesn't, then why go?"

The culture would have us believe that happiness is the god of the world. If it makes you happy, do it! The American Constitution even seems to have your back, because it is predicated on the idea that everyone has the right to pursue their own happiness, whatever that means to each individual. This is the situation of the world, and it always has been, since the fall into sin. It hears words of death, and those words look good, so, we eat. We eat those things of death, and they are sweet going down.

In efforts to fill the empty void, we seek happiness in all sorts of fleeting places. We try and capture glimpses in passing events. We fill our ears with more and more words of death from the arid ground, as newsrooms and talk shows and convention halls are filled with words that seem to have no end; that is, until the next big story, the next big game, or the next political cycle.

All the while the words that give eternal life are cast aside. Preaching is despised. Pop singers, Hollywood actors, Newscasters, podcasters, social media influencers, and politicians are all believed, even by many Christians, to have more authority in their words than Pastors.

The houses of God, the very places where His Word is to be read and preached, and we are to gladly hear and learn it, is cast to the side in favor of something that is more personally appealing. In this physical and emotional climate, it is easy for the sinful nature to say, “Well, everyone is dying. I know that my time will come. We all have to die anyway; I might as well have fun doing it.”

It is in this very culture, this very dry and dead, arid and unforgiving climate that Jesus came. God became man. He knows what it is like to look around and see nothing but death. Rome wasn't known for its strength of family values. While the governments were clashing with each other and with its own citizens, while struggles for power were being conducted in households of all nations, while children and parents were struggling against each other, while the masses were kept entertained with anything that would tickle the sinful nature, while bodies were struggling to breath, while lives were fighting to gather sticks to make one more meal, while people were in despair, in other words, as death ravaged the land Jesus came. To the widow who was in the midst of death struggling to care for her son, Jesus came.

Who is that widow? The church on earth. Jesus came to the Church on earth and what did He do? He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He set aside all waters to be a blessed flood and a laving washing away of sin.

In your baptism, He joined you to Himself. In those still waters, He leads you, His children, His most beloved sheep, to what? Behold, here you sit, and with His rod and His staff, that is His Holy Word, He leads you to this very table of His own crucified body and His own shed blood.

A table is prepared for you, and you are anointed with oil. The English word *anointed one* is the Greek word *Christ*. Jesus was anointed for the special work of dying for the sins of the world. He died to defeat death. His blood brings life to you, and it is poured into the cup, overflowing into your mouth, as you feast on His goodness and mercy here, in the midst of death.

As we live in the midst of death, with bodies that break down, He gives us sight beyond sight. He gives us ears to ear. To us poor, miserable sinners in dire-straits, not knowing when our last meal, our last gathering of sticks, our last day of work might be, He provides us with heavenly food.

He gives us this day our daily bread. Tomorrow is not a worry, God is already there. We eat and lay down in peace. As a reminder, when we go to bed we make the sign of the cross and remember our baptism. This day has been given to us as a gift.

When we wake up, as God's children, we know there are two places we can wake. In heaven, where there is no suffering, sadness, sickness, pain, tribulation, or death; or on earth, where we again pray for this day's daily bread.

In the morning, we again make the sign of the cross, reminding us that we are baptized. God is our Father. Christ is our brother. The Holy Spirit dwells in us, calling to our remembrance the words of Jesus, "***If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***"⁴

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is more to this life than what we see. While we see death, even here on the cross and upon the altar, faith sees life. Faith sees in this death of Jesus, death's defeat. Faith sees, "Fetch to me a morsel of bread in your hand," and replies, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Faith receives the words of life from the lectern and pulpit; receiving these morsels of bread, who is the very bread of life. In the midst of death, you feast; and while you feast, you hear from your Shepherd:

"Throughout all their lifetime My people will prove
My sov'reign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And then, when gray hairs will their temples adorn,
Like lambs they will still in My bosom be borne."⁵ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 16:24-25

⁵ How Firm a Foundation LSB 728:5

**Prayer of the Church
Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
17 September 2023**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Father in heaven, You sustained Elijah and Your saints of old through weal and woe, plenty and scarcity. Inspire us in the light of their faith to walk through all circumstances until we join them at Your unending banquet. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You see how this world, its money, its clothing and its possessions tempt us to worry and doubt, yet You know all our needs of body and soul and promise to care for us. Call us by Your Gospel to entrust everything into Your sure hands. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All-supplying Lord, You promise to provide for the proclamation of Your Gospel. Make Your Church and her pastors bold to build upon Your Word, that in times of woe and uncertainty she may never cease to share Your peace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Divine Master, Your Son warns that we cannot truly serve You and pursue security in worldly wealth. Grant us firm faith in Your provision and the peace which this world cannot give. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord God, You have set Joseph, our president, and Kim, our governor, as authorities over us for our good. Bless and sustain them with all they need to govern us, that we might be ruled wisely and in accord with Your will. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You have promised to send Your holy angels to guard and keep Your children. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Ruth and Dale* celebrate their birthdays, and *Cody, Sophia, and Kevin* celebrate their baptismal anniversaries. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Bow down Your ear, O Lord, and hear our cry on behalf of *Esther, Marvin, Ruth, Zoey, Betty, Jeri, Denise, Jillian, Pastor Small, Debbie, and those we name in our hearts*. Grant peace to the bereaved especially the family of David, grant that they may find comfort in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Save Your servants, heal them and bear witness thereby to Your mercy in Christ. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Increase our faith, O Lord, and grant that all who come to Your Supper may come in repentance, seeking Your forgiveness, and in the unity of a true confession. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**