

The Awakened Traveler: Safe Haven

1 Kings 17:8-16

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It's summertime. Days typically filled with sunshine, leisure, outdoor activities, vacations, rest, beach reads, campfires, sunsets and the list goes on. Does it ever meet our expectations, or turn out as anticipated? Setting aside our personal lives, let's think about life here this summer at FUMC. We've gained a new clergy person in Jenaba. We are in the middle of another staff turnover. COVID is still an ever-present challenge, evidenced by the return to high community transmission rate resulting in the mask mandate and distancing protocols in our buildings once again. Our trustees have spent more money than anticipated on our parsonages. New staff members are still onboarding – our new favorite word. A children's faith formation program is striving to regain previous levels of activity. I feel my breathing coming faster as I think of all this. My heart begins to beat stronger as I utter this list of change. Yet I can't or won't give in to the fear, frustration, and concern that is present under all that activity.

And why is that? Several reasons immediately spring to mind. I see them in the pews of our sanctuary. I will be able to see their names and thoughts in the chat from our livestream. It is this community. This congregation of faith. My fellow staff and co-workers. The hymns we sing together. The faith we proclaim. The scriptures we read. Metaphorically, the reason is our common bond, our shared faith, our steadfast God, the HOPE we experience in our fellowship together, and the gospel of LOVE revealed in the life of Jesus Christ.

This morning we're going to look at an old story, out of the Old Testament, a volume filled with change and upheaval; a story told of what it sometimes requires of us to be a strong link in the bond of fellowship and faith.

How does it relate to our Awakened Traveler series? Let's look a little more closely at First Kings chapter seventeen. There is a drought in Israel. The Wadi Cherith has dried up. God now instructs Elijah to head for Zarapheth on the coast. It is north of Tyre, closer to Sidon. When I look at a map from Biblical times, I can't help but wonder why there? It's in a foreign land. The distance could be 80 – 90 miles. And the destination is to find a widow. Of all people, a widow with a child. The least likely to have an abundance of resources. Yet those are God's clear instructions, and Elijah obeys. Like us, Elijah was a traveler too. Looking for food and shelter,

This was not the first journey for Elijah. He had already been sent by God to the Wadi Cherith as a safe place to escape King Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah, the prophet, had forewarned Ahab that there would be a drought upon the land. Ahab was angry. Elijah was in danger. God sent him to the Wadi where there would be water, made the ravens to bring him food and provided a "safe haven" out of sight of the wrath of Ahab. There are conflicting thoughts about the geography of Elijah's travels. The Wadi Cherith is thought to be east of the Jordan River. That's what it says in the Bible passage, but some scholars argue for it being in what we know today as the Wadi Qelt stretching between Jerusalem and Jericho. In either case Elijah traveled at least fifteen miles through the Judean wilderness or an even longer thirty miles to the opposite shore of the Jordan River. For both of these journeys, you would most likely be walking and

wearing sandals. Your journey would be taken during a drought, and it would be questionable if you could find food, It would take two to four days all while being a wanted man.

So why did Elijah go? These are my theories about the story. 1) He was a faithful prophet. God asked him to serve, and Elijah went. A blazing role model. 2) I believe God uses people and their stories to teach us important lessons that cause faith and love to grow in our hearts ultimately furthering the Kin-dom.

Ten years ago, Peter and I made a wonderful trip to the Pacific Northwest after our daughter Jennifer had begun her graduate studies at the University of Washington. We included a stop with Peter's sister's family on Vancouver Island. Then we boarded a ferry stopping in the San Juan Islands for some time by ourselves before joining Jennifer in Seattle. I had hoped to see Orcas (those known as the southern residents) in the waters of Puget Sound. Orcas are still on my bucket list. But you never know what you will encounter when away from home.

While waiting to board the ferry I struck up a conversation with a friendly woman in the passenger area. Coincidentally we sat near her on the ferry. I digress for a moment here. If you are a viewer of the television series NCIS, then you understand what I mean when I quote Leroy Jethro Gibbs "I don't believe in coincidence." We had boarded separately, looked around the boat for seats and found ourselves in the same deck and compartment. Our conversation continued. She talked about her regular shopping trips to Victoria while being a full-time resident on the San Juan Islands. We shared about our stay with Peter's sister, and our plans for while on the island. I'm sure I mentioned where we were staying.

When it was time to disembark, she offered us a ride as her husband was picking her up. Little did we know just how steep the hill to our accommodations was, nor the distance. They offered, we accepted, and as their van climbed from the dock at sea level to our hotel up the hill on the other end of main street we became more and more grateful. We took a cab when returning downhill to the ferry.

I am chagrined that in our conversation we never exchanged names or addresses. She will always be to me the "smiling woman on the ferry", much like the Widow of Zaraheth. Nothing coincidental about this to me, it was a serendipitous encounter and continues to give me much to ponder about hospitality.

So back to the widow of Zaraheth. Widows had no reliable source of income. They had no property. They were dependent on family for their support. And as she makes so clear to Elijah, she fully expects the fire and food she is creating to be the last for her and her child. "You've got to be kidding" are the words I would shout if I found myself in the same situation. But the widow follows Elijah's instructions, and shares what bread she is able to make. The oil and meal hold out until the rains come, just as Elijah had spoken and God had promised.

The hymns of our faith provide me with language and words when I otherwise struggle to articulate what is in my heart. Take our opening hymn today --

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord
is laid for your faith in his excellent word?
What more can he say, than to you he hath said*

To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Elijah did not need more. He took God at his word. He listened, he walked, and he found the Widow who would feed him. God's word – a firm foundation indeed!

Why does God seem to always send people walking? Abraham from Ur to Canaan. The Israelites first to Egypt for food, and then escaping slavery to wander thru the desert. What is it about the journey? The traveling. Is it being away from home? Is it the self-imposed solitude when we are not with all of our friends, neighbors, things, daily responsibilities? Does that free us up for God to be heard more clearly? Or is it the lesson learned that we are not completely in control? Is it being out of our comfort zone and vulnerable when our arrogance and "in charge" attitude can fall away and we are open to growth?

Journeys are sometimes to far off places where different languages are spoken, exotic locales with amazing architecture and totally different cultural rituals. But...it can also be as close as our backyard patio reading a new book that challenges us, participating in an Adult Faith Formation study here at church, or watching a movie, a documentary that threatens our previous understandings of history or relationships.

As we travel at home and abroad, let us be like Elijah: intently listening, willing to serve God with our feet. Let us also find courage like the Widow to share with others even when we are frightened or desperate.

Finally, may we all continue to make a welcome place within, around and among our community. Let us pray and give thanks that God blesses our community of faith and compels us to share with those who knock at our doors.

God, grant us the courage and strength to see new possibilities, new horizons, new friendships and instill within us the humility to accept the invitation and serve where you would have us. The world and all of its inhabitants are your creation, O Lord. You are our safe haven. You proclaimed that You are our God and we are your people. May we always be reminded of that and open our mind, hearts and doors to all your people. Amen.