

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

"The Life of the Saints"

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:1-24, Psalm 146

Hymns: Ye watchers and ye holy ones 607, Be still and know that I am God 64,
Psalm 23 (Townend), How blest are they who trust in Christ 601, For all the saints
611 (1,2,4,7)

October 30, 2016

Rev. Steve Filyk

All Saints' Sunday

Do you ever you ever read recruitment ads,
employment advertisements?

Maybe you're past that stage of life.
Maybe you've yet to enter that stage of life.

Maybe you are already gainfully employed
And yet, like me, are curious about what
Different companies are seeking
And offering to prospective hires.

If you look at an ad
You'll often find an inventory of duties
Which is then followed by a list of qualifications.

And then somewhere near the end
Something is said about what is offered to employees:
salary, benefits, opportunities for career development.

Here's one for Starbucks:

Do you want to work for Starbucks?

*All job seekers are eligible if they:
Are friendly team players with positive attitudes,
Are willing to work flexible shifts including early mornings,*

*Have great customer service skills,
And are comfortable in a face paced environment.*

And what does Starbucks offer?

*Benefits and RRSP contributions,
Tuition reimbursements,
Employee discounts and more!*

And you're thinking,
you get that working for a coffee shop?
Where can I sign up?

But if most jobs, careers, vocations
Come with a list of responsibilities and benefits,
Is there a job description for the life of faith;
A job description for the life of the saints?

Last week we heard about the big promises
God made to King David,
Even as David was consolidating his kingdom.

Today we enter the Biblical narrative
After the era of David and his son Solomon.
Now his consolidated kingdom has split,
And a man named Ahab
is reigning over the northern tribes.

As far as political histories go,
Ahab is regarded as successful king.

But as for his moral and religious record
Ahab and his wife Jezebel are considered
To be the bottom of the barrel.

While the Bible includes stories of their crimes,
the most consistent critique
has to do with religion.

Ahab welcomes his wife's foreign religious practices
Into his kingdom, into God's nation;
Ahab constructs "worship sites for Baal
In the heart of his empire."ⁱⁱ

The three miracle stories we heard today:

Stories of caretaking ravens, self-replenishing oil jugs in Sidon,
and the resurrection of young people,
are powerful statements against such syncretism.

“Each story highlights the power of Israel's God
over Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility and rain,
in the areas of nature, geography, and life itself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But while sending out this important public service message,
This passage has a lot more to teach us.
Oddly enough it works as a short-hand, a coles' notes,
A job description for the life of faith.

We learn about tasks and responsibilities of a life of faith,
And we also learn about that life's incredible benefits.
We are given a job description for the life of the Saints.

So what are some of the responsibilities?

Looking at Elijah
We can see almost too clearly that the life of the saints
Involves suffering in service.

That's right—suffering in service.

This is the sort of responsibility,
like picking up the bosses' dry cleaning,
or handling customer complaints,
That can make you quickly turn
to the next job posting.

Suffering in service is not something
We actively look for.

Yet Elijah is tasked with bringing
Hard words to king Ahab.

After he delivers this difficult message
Elijah needs to skip town

And depend on the resources of nature
And handouts from strangers, to survive.

Elijah reminds us
That when it comes to the life of faith,
The life of the saints,
Service involves suffering.

But Elijah is not the only person
To teach us about the responsibilities and tasks
Of a life of faith, of the life of the saints.

We also meet a widow, the widow of Zarephath,
Who shows us that the life of faith
Involves taking risks.

As an outsider to Israel
She is also sharing in its punishment,
With the famine reaching into her land.

When Elijah approaches her and asks her for water
She responds according to the rules of hospitality,
And brings him a cool drink.

But when he asks her, a widow with no protector,
A widow who is starving,
to cook up a little something for him,
She balks at his request.

She explains her dire situation.
But he counters with promises of a miracle.
And then Elijah asks her to feed him first.

Did you notice that?

Elijah doesn't ask her to share what she will be cooking.
He asks the widow to start making a meal just for him.
He asks her to trust
that there will be sufficient oil and flour left over.

So does the widow tell Elijah to hit the road?
 No. She takes a leap of faith.
 And we are shown that the life of faith
 The life of the saints, involves taking risks.

But I think there is at least one more task
 Of the life of faith, the life of the saints,
 That is also highlighted by these stories.

This time both Elijah and the widow
 Will together serve as our teachers
 As they reveal that the life of faith
 includes facing hard questions about God.

In this time of famine
 They manage to eke out an existence together.
 But then something terrible happens.
 The widow's son becomes sick.

The text tells us that "his illness was so severe
 That there was no breath left in him."^{iv}

When this happens the widow is obviously distressed
 And asks why Elijah has brought this upon her.
 When Elijah is alone with the lifeless body
 He himself cries out to heaven:

"O God, my God,
 why have you brought this terrible thing
 on this widow who has opened her home to me?"

Why have you killed her son?"^v

The widow can't understand
 Why she is being repaid with evil for her kindness.
 Elijah can't understand why God would allow tragedy
 To afflict this kind family.

Together they teach us
 That the life of faith,

The life of the saints,
 Involves asking all sorts of hard questions,
 About our experience of suffering and pain.

So are you sold on this job description?
 Suffering, risk, and hard questions.
 Are you ready to embrace the life of faith,
 The life of the saints?

Well remember that most job descriptions
 Start with the tasks and responsibilities.
 And then they move on to the benefits.

In the case of today's story
 The benefits ascribed to the life of faith
 Are worth waiting for.

While Elijah experiences suffering,
 living in the wilderness,
 God cares for him with crows.
 He is waited on by ravens.

When the oasis dries up
 God provides another solution.
 The audacious generosity of a poor stranger.

When the widow expects starvation
 She too has her needs cared for:
 a bottomless jug of oil,
 an endless jar of meal.

When her son falls ill,
 The prayer and lament of a visitor
 Raises him to unexpected new life.

Their stories,
 Both Elijah's and widow's
 teach us that God provides for us:
 rallying the forces of humanity and nature
 and the divine.

You will note that in all of these situations
 The care of God is momentary.
 The ravens fly away,
 the cooking supplies dwindle.

The son that is preserved
 will one day meet his death.

But God meets the saints
 in the middle of every new challenge.

As they risk faith, follow in suffering service, ask hard questions,
 God continually tends to their needs.

Of course it's not just the saints of the Bible
 That highlight these responsibilities and benefits.
 It's written out large by the friends and family
 Who have been with us here.

Some of you will remember Magda Wack.
 She died on New Year's Day back in 2010
 After a hard battle with bone cancer.

She once told me a story
 About being at a church service in Hawaii
 Still grieving the death of her first husband.

She said something was said in that service,
 That caught her, and challenged her.

It was like God said to her directly:
 "Don't worry about yourself,
 just take care of others.
 And your needs will be cared for too."^{vi}

She's accepted that challenge
 And committed her life to caring for others.
 And despite the pain of her illness
 She grew in thanksgiving and gratitude
 Till her very end.

You see she'd experience God's care
 Like Elijah and the widow.

Death was not the enemy that would tear
 Her away from her loved ones.
 Death would bring her closer to the God
 Who had always provided for her.

May her story,
 May the story of Elijah and the widow,
 Also be our story.

Amen.

ⁱ Starbucks recruitment add for GTA as seen on Yes Employment Services
www.yes.on.ca/starbucks-is-hiring-for-100-barista-potions/

ⁱⁱ Tremper Longman III "Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C; 1 Kings 17:8-16" 230

ⁱⁱⁱ Denise Dombkowski Hopkins "1 Kings 17:8-16, Exegetical Perspective" Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

^{iv} 1 Kings 17:17 NRSV

^v 1 Kings 17:20 MSG

^{vi} story recounted in sermon Steve Filyk "Two builders" August 9, 2009