

God's Word is also Effective in Helplessness!

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: 1st Kings 17:1-16



Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." ²And the word of the LORD came to him: ³"Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." ⁵So he went and did according to the word of the LORD. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. ⁶And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. ⁷And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. ⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, ⁹"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." ¹¹And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹²And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." ¹³And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" ¹⁵And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

A woman sits in the sand of Madagascar. She had collected a few cactus leaves in a shell. She says: "cactus leaves are becoming more rare in these Corona times. And the children are so hungry, so thirsty. Because there's no more bread." Because of the drought, there was once again no harvest in Madagascar and it's the same in many other countries.... While some can barely sustain themselves on cactus leaves, others have everything that their heart desires. Nevertheless, even in the abundance, people seem to have hunger and thirst. A young person from our neighborhood is very depressed. Last week she said: "I have enough to eat and I have enough to drink. I have everything that I need too. Family, friends, athletics, hobbies... nevertheless, I remain empty and unfulfilled. I long for something but don't know what it is." I want a simple answer to the hunger and thirst of the world! I wish I could help more people worldwide who are in economic trouble due to the Corona pandemic! I wish I could give answers to the depressed people, to the addicted people, to the people in family crisis! I want answers and solutions to the many problems in our world so that the Church is a place where one could find answers to these questions. We want to follow these thoughts today and also go deeper. We also

want to ask ourselves if the Church is of some benefit. And if so, why? What do people get out of it when they come to church? What makes the church attractive? What makes faith attractive so that people can say: "I would also like to be one of you?"

The Prophet Elijah shows us like no one else how God can actively intervene. Once Elijah defied a horde of the priests of Baal, let fire rain down from heaven, and undeniably demonstrated before all people that God lives and is stronger than the idols. On that day, no one doubted that the things of God are good and right. But we also get to know another side of Elijah. Shortly after this heroic moment, Elijah tremblingly runs away. The one who could kill a horde of priests by himself fled from a single woman. In our readings today, we also see the same pattern happening again. We see that God mightily intervenes in Elijah's story and at the same time, we see the helplessness and hopelessness too. In the first part, Elijah went to the king and announced a great drought and famine which then also happened. He did this at the Word of God and demonstrated the effect of God's Word. In the next scene, the same prophet must flee again. We see him sitting on the brook Cherith in the next scene. There he is fed by ravens. The ravens didn't bring much. But it was enough. Once again, Elijah could prove that God is at work. Because at God's command, he was given a small island. It was a place of refuge. A place of rescue. And then everything changed. The small island on which Elijah sat became smaller and smaller. The brook became drier. From day to day he could observe how the source of life dried up. What must have been going on inside of Elijah at this time? How did it feel to witness all that God had promised before as it became less and less? Perhaps Elijah thought something like this: "Have I done something wrong? Or has God completely forgotten me? Or perhaps the Word that God had said before no longer applies to me, I should sit down at this place?" I think we can all imagine very well Elijah's situation on the brook Cherith. Perhaps Elijah's situation at the brook Cherith is comparable to the situation of the whole Church. Many a person can remember times when the churches were full. Or when the young people still came to church. Some can remember how God's Word was like a spring that satisfied every hunger and thirst. What a joy it was at that time to go to church or to read the Bible or to pray. And now? It seems to me we are like Elijah on a little island. The space we find ourselves in becomes smaller. The church becomes smaller and we can't even get our own youth excited about the Word of God. We don't know what we should do. So we return to the prophet Elijah. Elijah is one of the most impressive figures of the Bible. Elijah is impressive not because he is a type of spiritual Superman and could, for example, oppose a horde of the priests of Baal by himself. No, what impresses me with him is that he simply acts on the Word of God. First by confronting the king of Israel. Then as he sits down next to this unimpressive brook Cherith. Why? Just because God had said so. Perhaps Elijah's greatest challenge came after that. Because after the brook Cherith dried up, Elijah should simply set aside everything that was previously right and go into the unknown at God's Word. He should go to where Baal is worshiped. There where Baal is in power. According to the understanding and faith of Elijah, an impossible thing. But Elijah did all of that. He did it because God had said so. Elijah was able to break out of the tight framework where he was. He was able to break out of the small space which was initially exactly right and search for a new bank. He was able to do this because he was given the ability to recognize God's Word. God's Word, which is not idle and motionless, rather strong and effective. God's Word, which cannot be manipulated or controlled by us humans, but God's Word that breaks into our world and happens. God's Word, which happens in our world depending on the situation and environment and changes people's hearts. Sometimes God's Word happens among Germans, sometimes among former Muslims, Iranians, Africans, Brazilians, and many others. God Himself is behind it and speaks. Missionaries and pastor are amazed because the Word of God happens—not because pastors or

missionaries want it to or because they thought of a better strategy. Rather it happens all on its own. At most it could be that church workers even stand in the way of this Word at one point or another. What would happen if Elijah stood in the way of the Word of God? If Elijah had said: "No, God, what You say isn't right. The right place for me to sit is here at the brook Cherith. You said so at the beginning and that's the way it has always been. And besides, I don't like those people, who worship evil gods." No, Elijah didn't do that. Instead, he went out at God's Word, even if it seemed impossible and made no sense according to human understanding. But the story of God's Word and Elijah would become even more impossible. At the gate of the city, Elijah met a Gentile woman. Then of all people, Elijah chose this widow. She should bring him water. When she did this, Elijah asked even more. She should give to Elijah from what little she had. At first, this woman complained to Elijah. What she has is, as it were, the very last before she would die with her son. According to human terms, it was completely understandable that she had nothing to give up in this situation. Elijah's answer is not only brazen, but also completely impossible. He explains to the woman that her food would simply multiply, exactly like in the story: "The Magic Table." And the astonishing thing about the story is that this woman believed Elijah. What's more, she didn't just believe Elijah rather she believed the God of Israel. Just like that, without questions and apparently without doubting, she simply gave Elijah everything that she had. And all this even though she had nothing to do with Elijah and his God. This story is truly amazing. Earlier I said that I admire Elijah for doing things just like that at God's Word. Now we must be amazed even more because the widow of Zarephath does exactly the same. And she isn't even a prophet. She didn't even belong to the people of Israel! By now we realize that the miracle of faith is not comprehensible. Now we understand: The miracle of faith comes about not because Elijah was so strong in the faith. The miracle also doesn't come about because this woman in Zarephath had a strong faith. The miracle happened because God Himself spoke. The miracle isn't that the people in this story had strong faith. The miracle is that God gave it to them. We can't define God. We can't transfer the agenda of Elijah one to one in our world. We can merely pass on God's Word and we can try with all that's in us to help people in need. Even when we notice that there isn't enough. But God acts on it all. And He acts as He wants and not how we want Him to. Sometimes He comes as a devastating fire, sometimes in the silence. Sometimes, He gives His servants strong faith and courage, sometimes He demonstrates His power precisely because His servants are weak. God is entirely unrestricted in His actions. Sometimes we have success, sometimes failure. God meets us one way today and tomorrow completely differently. God's freedom, however, is not an inconsistent freedom. It is precisely in His freedom that the living God is not indifferent to what happens to us in the light and in the darkness. In abundance, as in poverty, God's strong arms are always around us. And these strong arms are there to hold us and to protect us from evil. That gives us courage. Precisely in dark times, it gives us courage. When we are in need and don't know how to go on, we realize that God is near to us, a constant source of strength. Elijah experienced both: God's distance and God's nearness. Jesus also experienced both God's nearness as well as God's distance. It becomes clear in Jesus that God allows for both. God is not only a God of abundance and success, but God also surrounds and embraces the failures. And that makes us free! The fact that there is so much need in our world can discourage us. The fact that we have so little to offer can discourage us. But it shouldn't. Because it is God who speaks and at His Word it happens. It happens here and there, sometimes visibly and powerfully. Sometimes so inconspicuously that we will only become aware of it on the Last Day.

Amen.