

**In Dire Straits**  
**1 Kings 17: 8-24**  
**Luke 7: 11-16**

First off, I want to thank the wonderful world of the Internet (and my cousin in Florida) for these three tidbits.

If you put a buzzard in a pen that is six feet by eight feet and is entirely open at the top, the bird, in spite of its ability to fly, will be an absolute prisoner. The reason is that a buzzard always begins a flight from the ground with a run of ten to twelve feet. Without space to run, as is its habit, it will not even attempt to fly, but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top.

Likewise, the ordinary bat that flies around at night, a remarkably nimble creature in the air (and one that we have been all too familiar with here at this church) cannot take off from a level place. If it finds itself on the floor or on flat ground, as we often discovered, all it can do is shuffle about helplessly until it reaches some slight elevation from which it can throw itself into the air.

A bumblebee, if dropped into an open drinking glass, will be there until it dies, unless it is taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides near the bottom. It will continue seek a way where none exists until it expires.

These creatures – the buzzard, the bat and the bumblebee - fall into dire straits and cannot escape. The characters in the story from First Kings are in dire straits as well.

Elijah, the prophet, is hungry and thirsty. When he first fled from Ahab, God sent him to a place called the Wadi Cherith (a wadi is a stream

bed that contains water only in the rainy season). There he had water to drink, and God provided for ravens to drop food for him. But, there being a drought, the wadi soon dried up. So God sent him to a widow in Sidon – deep into territory where Baal is worshiped – to the town of Zarephath. This widow, God said, would feed Elijah.

But the widow was pretty bad off herself, there being a drought. So her reply, when Elijah asked for food and drink, was, as you heard: *“As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”*

Why God would send Elijah to a widow is something to ponder. Widows often had no means of economic support and if they were not sustained by the king or the religious community, they were soon reduced to poverty and forced to become scavengers and beggars.

This widow had a son, yet this did not make her situation better because the son of a widow was an orphan because it was a father who gave a family status and protection. Still, to the widow, the son represented hope for the future. But her hope was dashed when the son became so ill that “there was no breath left in him.”

Dire, dire straits indeed. But here we have our first consideration. **We all – even devout Christians - come into dire straits at one time or another, situations when we imagine there is no way out.**

So think on this. Where in your life do you feel your resources running low, as if you’re on your last bit of meal or oil? Where is drought in your life? What resources need replenishing? When do you feel nearly out of breath?

Last week I mentioned the untimely death of Bill Tiger, who grew up in this town and in this church. Bill and his wife Claudia were members of the Schooley's Mountain Presbyterian Church, where Bill had served as an elder and treasurer for the past fifteen years. Amy Lincoln, the pastor, besides grieving the loss, is pretty worried about who will fill that treasurer position. She feels like the congregation is in dire straits right now. But I said, with conviction, that God would provide someone.

**Because God provides the way out of dire straits.**

In the Scripture story, Elijah, the prophet of God, was the means. Elijah reported to the widow: *For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.* And indeed it was so. In part two, Elijah revived the widow's son, brought back the breath that had left him, brought him to life again.

The widow's response was a simple declaration: ... [she]said to Elijah, *"Now I know the truth that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."*

In the passage that Tim read from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus does almost exactly the same thing as Elijah when he revives the son of a widow in the town of Nain. *As Jesus approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son and she was a widow...when [Jesus] saw her he had compassion.* And the breath that had gone from the son was returned. Through miracles like this, people began to realize that Jesus was someone special. They began to

recognize Jesus as divine, the Son of God. Jesus, I am sure, counted on people's remembering their oral history, remembering the stories of Elijah, to lead them in understanding who he was.

So here is the second issue for consideration. How do you recognize a person of God in this day and age? How do you know who to trust with your troubles, with your needs and frustrations and fears. Where do you seek to relieve your own spiritual drought?

I think the women who came to the retreat at the convent in Mendham yesterday discovered one way that God speaks - through individuals and places and times apart. At the beginning we asked each one to share something of the stresses in their lives and the stories were all different, yet all difficult. Just speaking the words in the company of others who were drawn together by the Holy Spirit proved to be life-giving. I think we will plan a women's retreat again. And perhaps a men's retreat as well...

God comes to us, also of course, at this communion table. We come in need of sustenance. We come with spirits in need of replenishment. And we come in faith and hope that God will lift us up and revive our souls again.

So many of the psalms express what we need to say. And so, with the psalmist we pray: come quickly to me, O Lord; give ear to my voice when I call to you...I pour out my complaint before you; when my spirit is faint, you know my way; I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...the Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. Amen.

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