

25th Sunday after Pentecost B
November 11, 2018
Church of the Advent

Hard Times

I would be willing to bet that there is not one person amongst us here that could not claim living through some hard times. For some of us that might conjure up memories from childhood, or stories of going out on our own in the world and leaving home for the first time. For others it might stir up the experience of broken relationships, broken promises or broken trust that left us holding the proverbial bag, or of climbing out of a hole we dug ourselves into with decisions that seemed like a good idea at the time. Hard times have surely been had by generations of men and women who signed up for military service and found themselves bearing the lifetime scars of forever wars that make so much less sense in their aftermath than they did in their inception. Throughout human history, there have probably not been many who have escaped hard times of one kind or another; they seem to be part of life as we have always known it, in spite of directing a great deal of attention, energy and resources to avoid and escape them. Sometimes I think that the hyper-speed at which our world moves today, and the exhaustion we feel from keeping pace with it, are signs that we are all running as fast as we can from hard times.

And who can blame us? Evolution teaches us that self-preservation is part of our nature. Overcoming adversity with resilience is part of our human heritage. And challenges to living on easy street are essential to our narrative history with God--in a word, they are biblical. I would not claim that hard times are the central theme of the Good News we share as believers, but they sure have their place in the story, especially in today's readings from Holy Scripture. Perhaps we are meant today to ponder this mystery of the hard side of life, for what good are hard times, anyway?

From the Old Testament we have the story of the prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath. The back story for this one--the prequel if you will--is that King Ahab, following a long list of bad kings, inherited the rule of the Israelites, the people of God, but messed up when he married Jezebel, who came from a people who worshipped the god Baal. If that wasn't enough, Ahab *allowed* the worship of Baal, even building an altar to Baal in Samaria. God was not pleased, and Ahab's kingdom suffered from drought and famine. God sent the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab, to give him a chance to make things right and to tell him God wanted to send

the rains. On his way through the desert Elijah was sustained by a small stream of water and fed by ravens. Then he arrived at the widow's house.

Now the widow was already in dire straits when Elijah arrived. In the best of times--without drought and famine--she would have struggled to sustain herself and her young son without a husband to provide for her, and not had much--if anything--left over for anyone else. She knew their end was near, and in spite of her scrimping and rationing of their stores, they were down to their last meal before there would be no more. They would soon die of starvation--literally--as many people in parts of our world still do, as they are today in Yemen in the Middle East. When the water dried up that had keeping Elijah alive in the desert, God sent him to the widow's house specifically; God told Elijah the widow had been *commanded* to feed him--though that particular conversation was not recorded.

When he arrived and asked for food and water, the widow responded as any mother would--she told Elijah the truth that there was but one meal left for her and her son--but then she somehow acted on God's command--perhaps one that had been laid silently on her heart--to offer



all that she had to Elijah--a stranger sent by God whom she somehow trusted when he told her not to be afraid, that all would be well. That took a lot of faith--the kind of faith that is born in hard times. For isn't that the case, that our faith can get stronger in hard times? Do we not cry out to our God louder and longer and with more longing when we find ourselves in darkness and cannot see the way forward? It is not when we have nothing left to lose that we see more clearly what is important and what is less so? When we have lost control over things, are we not more ready to cede control to God and to become aware of his blessings? And is this not a lesson we find ourselves learning over and over--that when we feel that we need God the most, we open ourselves up to his presence--ready to give God all that we are and all that we have, and to give God the glory for every piece of light that comes to us in the darkness?

In our gospel story from Mark today, we see Jesus saying something very much like this, but in an inverse and a bit more caustic way. He seems a bit annoyed at the scribes--who were the elite people of that place and time--who had no problem strutting about like peacocks from their positions of power and control. Jesus was pointing out that they expected respect from

others just because they had *more* than other people--a more they felt they deserved. He points out their hypocrisy at squeezing their wealth out of poor widows while making a show of public sympathy and prayers for those same widows who found themselves poor--as if the dots could not be connected in God's eyes. For the scribes things were going well, and they felt no shame acting all *backpatty* about their status. If that term is unfamiliar I picked it up from a clergy colleague who used it describe our human propensity to self-congratulation. The faith of the scribes was in themselves and their success--in God, not so much. Their giving to the treasury of the Temple cost them little; their relationship with God was for show.

At the same time and in the same place, Jesus noticed the poor widow dropping her pennies into the collection box, noting that they could have been the last thing in her possession--a representation of a last meal for her and possibly her children. She had nothing, compared to the scribes; living through hard times was an everyday thing for her, yet her relationship with God was necessary and real; she was aware of what was important and what was not; her faith was as strong as the Widow of Zarephath that all would be well and that God would watch over her and care for her in her faithfulness if she would keep her heart open to his commandments.

To hear what the Word of God is saying to God's people today in these stories is challenging, because we are programmed in our world to value the successes of scribes over the struggles of poor widows--whomever they represent in our own culture and context. We believe in reward for work, but we also don't turn down golden opportunity or shun blind luck. We believe in a society that praises initiative, determination and drive as pathways to success, measured by the universal currency of money and all it can buy, but that means we accept that gains for some will mean losses for others. So then how do we understand these stories that offer both a picture of people of faith in hard times, and people who might be a bit *backpatty* about their good times, but for whom God is wrestling for attention--for whom God is jumping up and down for attention?

The Holy Scriptures teach us that God wants his people to flourish--for *all* of God's people to be the best people we can be. And God wants to be in relationship with *all his people--all of them, all the time*. God is ready and waiting for us in hard times, but does not desire that we become desperate and lost before we seek his love. God wants to be in relationship with us in good times, too, hearing us count our blessings, seeing us share our abundance without fear of hard times catching up with us, commanding us to watch out and care for the ones around us

who might find themselves in a rough patch that we have known all too well. Because it is not through our own exhausting and controlling efforts to shore up our own defenses and to stock our cupboards that we find security and a lasting peace that passes all understanding. Only in relationship with our God who loves us and waits for us to see and know that love--only in *faithfulness*--can we truly believe that all shall be well, and that the jars and jugs in our larder will never be empty. Thanks be to God. Amen.

