

**Marci Auld Glass
Oct 25, 2009**

**The Word of the Lord
Southminster Presbyterian**

**1 Kings 17
YotB, Reformation**

As you may have already read in the bulletin, today is Reformation Sunday. Our Call to Worship, prayers of confession illumination, and other pieces in the service today date from the early years of the Reformation—back in the mid 16th century. Our hymns today were written by early Reformers as well.

On this last Sunday in October each year, we take a look back at our roots as Presbyterians and as Christians of the Reformed tradition. While the Presbyterian Church grew from the Reformation in Scotland, we also trace our history back to the reformers in Europe—Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others. On Oct 31, 1517, Martin Luther had some ideas to reform his beloved church. So he nailed them to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg. 95 ideas in a long list. And while there were people talking about reform before Luther, it is to this moment in history that we put a start date on the Reformation.

Among those ideas that changed the world and influenced our worship today was the understanding of the Priesthood of all believers—which means that we don't believe that people like me, who are ordained to the priesthood or ministry, are holier than you are. Each of us is capable and encouraged in community to seek an experience of the Divine directly. Rather than mediating your faith through the priest (think of confessions, the selling of indulgences, etc), the reformers believed that we could pray our confessions to God. I know many of you are not fans of the prayer of confession, but try to see it as an act of liberation. Rather than have to come and speak your confessions to me, you are free to approach God yourself. This belief also led to the idea that the Bible should be read by the people in their own languages, and not just by the clergy in Latin. One of the reasons that Presbyterians are known for starting schools all over the world is because you have to know how to read in order to read the Bible. The very act of reading the Bible is a claim we make that God can and does speak to each of us.

In our Year of the Bible readings this week, we began the story of the prophet Elijah.

If you lost interest in daily bible reading somewhere back in Leviticus or Numbers, or feel as if you fell so far behind that you can't start reading again, I invite you to pick it up with the story of Elijah, which begins in 1 Kings 17. Elijah is a pivotal figure in the history of Israel and is in the minds of many of our New Testament authors. It is to Elijah that John

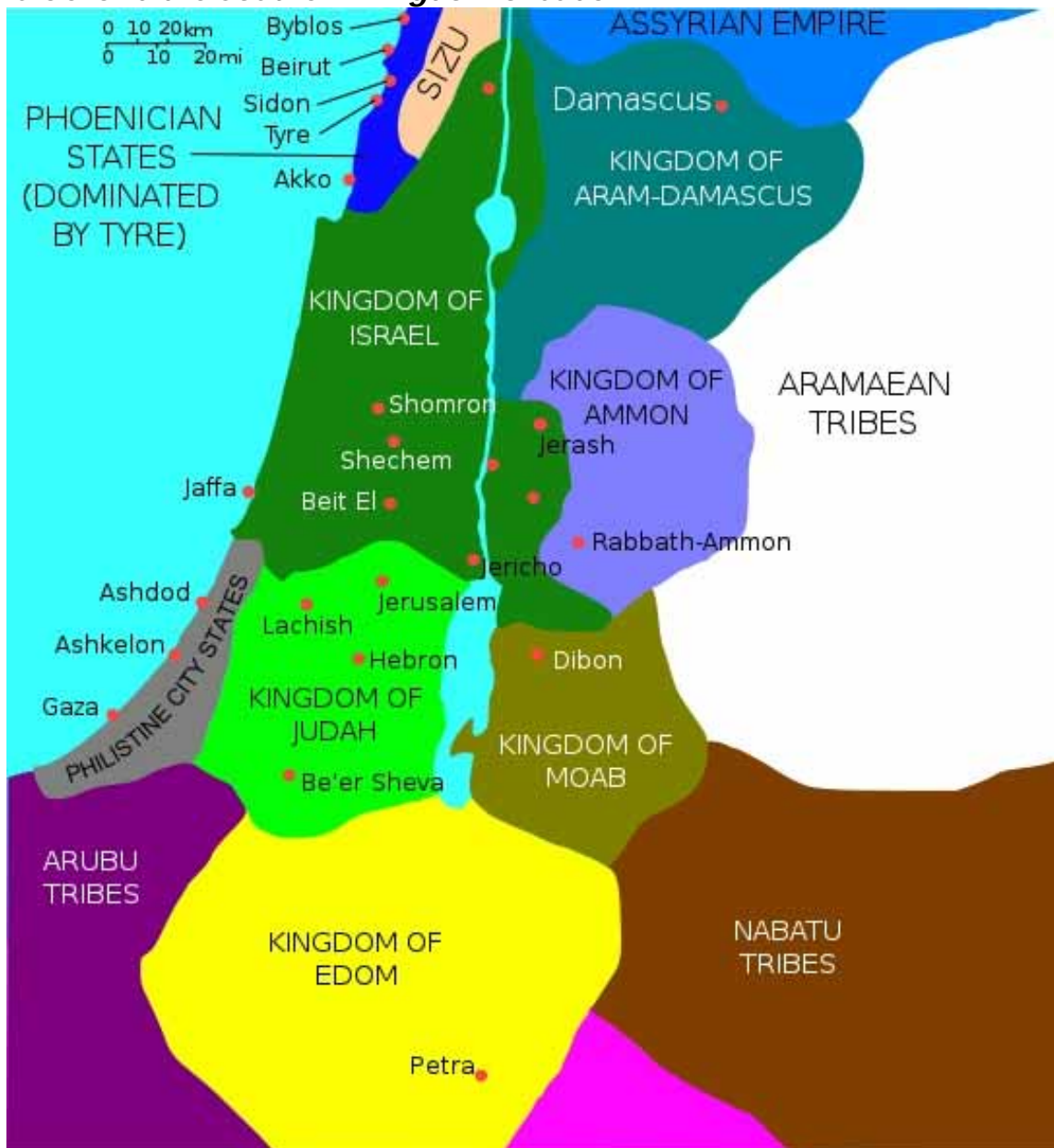
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the Baptist and Jesus are often connected, so knowing the story of Elijah will help you understand how 1st Century Jews understood the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Additionally, the story of Elijah is just great storytelling.

As Elijah's story begins, Ahab is king of Israel. So the united kingdom that Solomon had inherited has divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.



And Ahab, in the Northern Kingdom, is more evil than any king before him, which is saying something because many of the kings before him

were about as evil as you could imagine. In addition to being a bad and evil king, Ahab also married Jezebel, who was Phoenician, from the city of Sidon, shown in blue at the top of the map. While there are plenty of biblical examples of foreigners being faithful and good members of society, Jezebel would not be one of them. Jezebel and Ahab are the poster children of evil, idol worshipping, unfaithful, bad, bad leaders. And Jezebel gives a face to the Biblical campaign against intermarriage. "See—we told you what would happen when you married foreign women!"

And so Elijah appears on the scene to tell Ahab, "as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word". The punishment for Ahab's evil is a drought.

And while the drought may come because of the Word of God, note that sustenance in the midst of drought come from God as well. God instructs Elijah to a wadi, or a riverbed or canyon, where there is water. And the ravens feed him in the morning and the evening. So before we move on to the rest of this story, remember that the life of faith is not a promise that you won't go through a drought, but when you are in a proverbial drought, God will provide. It may just be water in a nearly dry riverbed and food provided by birds, but God does not leave us alone.

Eventually even the riverbed runs dry and the Word of the Lord sends Elijah to someone for help. He goes to Zarephath, a Phoenician town near Sidon, which today would be in Lebanon. So the Word of the Lord sends Elijah to one of these foreign women the rest of the Bible keeps warning us about. And a widow, at that. Women left their own families when they were married and became a part of their husband's family. But her husband is dead. And a woman without a man to look out for her is in trouble in that culture. This widow, as it turns out, is preparing to make her own last supper. She's out of food and resources. She and her son are about to die from lack of food.

And Elijah asks her to bring him some water and some bread.

I'm not sure how I would feel if I were about to die and God's prophet came and asked for my last little bit of food. I suspect my answer would not have been nearly as nice as hers.

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And then Elijah gives her an answer that we normally hear from angels when they encounter humans—"Do not be afraid." What follows the Word of the Lord's instructions to share her food is a blessing.

Do not be afraid. You may think you are about to die, but you're not.

Do not be afraid. You may not think you have enough to share, but you do.

Do not be afraid. God doesn't ask you to give your last food unless God is about to do something big.

Elijah goes on to tell the woman that her jar of meal will not run empty and her jug of oil will not fail. Until the rains fall again, she will have enough to eat.

Elijah is great and all. Don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan. But this widow from Zarephath is my new hero. Perhaps her husband's family would have taken care of her in normal times, but they are in a drought, the worst economic situation since the Great Depression. She's on her own. Food stamps have been cut off.

And she's not even an Israelite. Did you notice what she said to Elijah? "As the Lord, YOUR God, lives, I have nothing baked..." This isn't even her God she's helping out.

And then, in a great act of faith, she takes the last of her meal, scraping out the bottom of the jar with her spatula to get every last bit, and she takes the last of her oil, shaking the jug upside down over the pot until all of the oil has drip, drip dripped its way out of the jug, and she puts it in the oven. She didn't have enough to sustain herself and her son, yet she trusts the word of Elijah's God and offers that small loaf to sustain her, her son, and Elijah.

She does not say, as soon as God fills up my pantry, I'd be happy to make you some bread.

She does not say, I'd love to help you, but times are tight. Surely you understand why I can't donate right now.

She does not say, I'd love to help you, but I don't know you and I'm not sure what you did to end up hungry.

She doesn't ask Elijah to explain how he got himself in this situation. He's hungry. She feeds him. Possibly at risk to herself and her child. She doesn't wait for proof from God either. She hears the Word of someone else's God and she responds in faith.

We're beginning our Stewardship Campaign and beginning to plan for the 2010 budget and the parallels are strong between this text and our lives. Our community is also in a drought. Times are tight for many people. Yet the Word of the Lord comes to us and says, Do not be afraid. You may think you are out of resources, but you're not.

Do not be afraid. You may not think you have enough to share, but you do.

Do not be afraid. God doesn't ask you to give unless God is about to do something big.

Our task of stewardship is similar to what the widow of Zarephath experienced. We listen for the Word of God to come to us, even if we're in the midst of an economic drought. Then we trust the Word of God and go out on faith to do something important. Because Stewardship happens in that order too. We don't wait for something great to get started and then say, "okay, I'll support that".

Stewardship is an act of faith, of saying, "Here's what I'll contribute to what God is dreaming to do with Southminster in our community". And then, once your pledges are in, the Session can build the budget.

We have to bake our loaves even before God has filled the jars with meal and the jugs with oil.

By committing to pledge to Southminster, each year you are like the widow from Zaraphath, answering God's call to be a witness of faith in this community.

If every member of Southminster pledged what they could pledge, do you know what we could do?

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Many of you have talked about wanting to help our youth program grow, but that takes resources. People have dreamed about fixing up our aging facilities, but that takes resources. Ten percent of our budget currently goes to mission work in the church. This year we'd like to increase that to support more local agencies. Think about the people in our community who could be fed, and clothed, and supported as they get back on their feet and out of homelessness. Each of us, individually, may be able to just do a little. But when we respond to God's call, our jars will never run empty and our jugs will always have oil.

But as we read the text, we realize that the feeding isn't the real miracle. At least it isn't the only one. What the work of nourishment does is set in place the chance for new life.

Because the widow's son falls ill and dies. But Elijah cries out to God, using his own words to seek a miracle. And the Lord listens to Elijah and life returns to the widow's son.

All of our work in stewardship, planning, and administering the work of the church is not just so we can say we have planned, budgeted and worked. It is so we can be a place of miracles. Who knows what God may do yet in this place! When the widow invited Elijah into her home, her son wasn't ill. She didn't let him so he could heal her son. This miracle was something she couldn't even imagine she would need.

What, yet, may God do for this place? Let us listen for the word of the Lord in the midst of our lives, so we may respond in faith. And may we be on the lookout for miracles that will result. Amen.