

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

November 10, 2024

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

Dr. Jo Forrest

HEART of GENEROSITY
Our Limited Imaginations
Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2024 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 10, 2024

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

Yesterday, when I lamented to the worship team that again I'd revise this sermon, one questioned if I still planned to talk about Elijah. It's been on the calendar for months, but is that wise? He performs fantastic miracles, some with pyrotechnics and calls down fire from heaven. ¹

Not that story. The more I thought about it, today's story seems to be a training exercise.

In the ancient of days, after the GOAT, King David, and his wise son Solomon, the books of First and Second recounts a revolving door of monarchs who were consistently measured by the standard if they "did evil in the sight of the Lord."

Composed during the exile these writers were convinced the long list of Israeli kings brought about their collective downfall. They worshipped false gods, promoted self-serving policies, and enriched themselves at the expense of the people.

¹ This sermon was preached at Tempe Emanuel of the South Hills after an electrical failure at Westminster almost caused a fire...a potentially devastating fire on Friday, November 9. We knew the building would be without power through at least the weekend and potentially longer. That same Friday evening, Rabbi Aaron Meyer immediately replied to my text, welcoming Westminster to use their sanctuary. We received an amazing warmth of hospitality.

Our reading for today points us to the time of King Ahab whose wife Jezebel seduces him to do exactly that: turn from God towards her pagan gods and rituals. Scripture claims, “(King) Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”

Here is where the great prophet Elijah bursts on to the scene, scolds Ahab, predicts a drought, and ignites fury. For these reasons, Elijah flees for his life.

*Dear God,
In times of uncertainty, we seek your presence.
Silence the distractions and skepticism
that limits what we see and can imagine.
Send your spirit among this story
so we can find you in our own lives.
Turn us to trust you and to turn to one another. Amen.*

1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, **and live there**, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

So Elijah set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

As she was going to bring it, Elijah called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "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."

Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; 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. 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."

She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Today's story brings us face to face with people, just like you and me, and the core questions about how people, just like you and me, are supposed to live.

Elijah's name literally means, "the Lord is my God."

Elijah will die in the drought and God commands him to go to Zarephath and *live*, I emphasize *live* with a widow.

Rather than degrade this woman further by speaking of her with the label of grief and loss, let's give her a name. Imagine her name is A'dab, the Arabic word for "hope or need."

Together with the poor, foreigners, and orphans, A'dab and her family are vulnerable to injury, violence, and death, even in good times. Because of the drought, she fully expects to die—and soon.

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

A'bad's plight humanizes the casualties of this tragic interplay of politics and religion. In a time of national crisis, her needs would be considered last, especially under King Ahab's rule.

What happens instead raises questions for us about relationships, sharing, abundance, and the limits of our imaginations.

The names Zarephath and Sidon offer little meaning to us today. At the time, this place offered nothing but hostility for a faithful Jew. Coupled with the idea of living with a widow, to be sent there seems like a death sentence for Elijah.

Telling him to live with A'dab in Zarephath is like sending someone wearing a hat purchased in 2016 embroidered with "MAGA" to take up residence with mother grieving her son's death in a neighborhood filled with *Black Lives Matters* signs. Or expecting a home promoting Mothers Demand Action to shelter an NRA gun enthusiast. Or, pick any current version of people who seem mortal enemies such as people from Ukraine versus Russia, or the various factions in Sudan, or our Holy Land.

This story is about living with a person who you imagine might prefer you dead, particularly in a time when everyone lives in fear.

If Elijah took a chance, A'dab's risk was even greater.

For her to heed Elijah's call "do not be afraid" and trust "there will be enough" asks her to believe a God she does not worship and give her last morsel of flour to a stranger before her own son.

Here is a woman unable to feed her little boy, and yet in Elijah's presence, she takes a risk- to share from her scarcity. And, she allows this encounter to stretch her imagination. Maybe there is enough. Maybe this man is her neighbor.

Together they embody what it means for two people to make the most of their lives, regardless of who rules, regardless of the world's labels, regardless of why they should recoil from one another.

Yes, Elijah predicts the miracle, but she is the one who sets it in motion by her trust and risky generosity. By God's

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

generosity the grain and oil never run out. Day-by-day, they learn to trust each other and God.

Our faith history teaches us that sharing, even our meager resources, becomes the way to unlock the limits we place on others, ourselves, and God's generosity.

Consider the stories of Ruth and Naomi. Elijah and this woman. The Good Samaritan. The woman who dips cool water for Jesus. Paul's courage to carry the gospel far from his home. Our faith bolsters us. God binds us together, even with people we perceive as unlikely or even imagined as enemies.

Tuesday's election results present the stark truth of how deeply divided this community and country are over essential aspects of daily life and the future of our children. This is particularly true at Westminster, considered a "purple" congregation. We are not purple from the perspective of everyone sharing middle-of-the-road political views. We appear purple only when viewed from a distance. Up close this church reveals deep red and blue stripes.

To heal our community and country, it starts with us; by learning to live with one another day-by-day, sharing our lives.

In all my days as a minister, after the election I witnessed more tears of anguish, fear, lament, rage, and despair. I witnessed tears shed from more people than after any mass shooting, natural disaster, or local riots of terror. Nothing ever evoked such response.

People fear for their children, who may be vulnerable by race. Some because of a sexual orientation, or some other human expression not within the norms. People fear for their marriages, a covenant blessed by God. You are not labels. We see you and know your names.

Others voice euphoria over the outcomes, having worked to change the leadership. We can listen to you to discern what and how you think we can change, particularly those who have felt unseen or ignored.

Some in our community express relief the election is over, period.

HEART of GENEROSITY: Our Limited Imaginations

We are divided by problems that have plagued us since our nation's founding, such as racism, class divisions, and sexism. We are divided on how to address the more contemporary problems of economic strain, military conflict in far-flung places, and immigration. The media and advertisements feed on these grievous realities with heightened controversy and spectacle.

Our job as members of the church is to take the long view. We remember that the community of God's faithful has almost always existed in a dangerous and fraught political climate.

The way forward depends upon you and me. We begin by praying for our newly elected President, Vice President and other leaders. We pray for them and our democracy.

We pray for one another by what we do.

We obey Jesus' command to love God and neighbor by the priorities articulated years ago at Westminster to

accept everyone with love,
seek justice without exception,

inspire wonder and meaning, and
energize the next generation.

It is easy to believe in death-dealing powers, for that is what we witness in the world every day.

This ordinary, humble woman couldn't have imagined what her quiet act of hospitality would ultimately accomplish, nor that we would be reading her story nearly 3000 years later.

History turns on very small hinges. Every day as A'dab, her son, and Elijah ate their little cakes of bread, they were reminded that God could be trusted--for another day. And every day their faith grew.

There would come a day when Elijah would need all of these lessons because life wasn't going to get any easier for him. And who knows how God used these lessons in A'dab her son's lives? The lessons of trust may look small but so much rides on learning to imagine something new.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org