



# *The Westminster Pulpit*

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

## ***“Running on empty?”*** **Sermon on 1 Kings 17:8-16**

Donovan A. Drake

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A long time ago, there was a king of Israel named Ahab. King Ahab happened to marry a woman named Jezebel, who wasn't just any Jezebel; she was the first Jezebel. A derogatory name, but Jezebel was actually a woman who took worship seriously.

On Sunday morning, she would get the king up and out of the palace and on to worship, the worship of Baal. A god that she imported into Israel. A god that the people put in charge of the weather.

It's the kind of god that would fit well in the state of Iowa. A place where people are always talking about the weather and how the crops are growing, more so than they talk about the God of Israel, well, because it's business.

King Ahab invested heavily in the economy of Baal. What's good for the economy is good for the king.

You might guess that the God who created the heavens and the earth wasn't happy about the whole Baal thing. So, God sent a prophet named Elijah to tell the king that God was angry, and the prophet said to the king, “The Almighty God says it will rain no more. What are your Baal gods going to do about that?”

The problem with reprimanding Ahab and Jezebel is that during a drought, the ones who suffer the least are the kings and the rich, and the ones who suffer the most are the poor. Even the prophet Elijah is thirsty for some water and some food. He's running on empty.

*1 Kings 17:8-16*

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he 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, he 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 afterwards 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.

Elijah has no water. No food. He's running on empty.

A widow gathers sticks to build a fire in order to have a last supper with her son. Little bit of flour. A little bit of oil. There's nothing left! She's running on empty.

None of us have been in their shoes.

Running on empty for us is more of a feeling. We have this feeling of emptiness. There's no there, there. I've heard a number of you this week express that feeling. No joy. No hope. Loss. Empty.

While others of you are delighted! We have both great distraught and great joy in this room. In this divided world, the only time you see you two together is on the split screen. "You can see on the screen the contrast of moods at both Democratic and Republican headquarters."

Together on the split screen, in reality, they are miles apart. But, here, in worship, we are together. Worshipping, not our feelings, but God. Right?

In my years as your pastor, one thing I have come to know is that both Democrats and Republicans in this congregation feel as though they are the minority. I FEEL as though it's 60/40 Red... I FEEL it's 60/40 Blue. Isn't that interesting?

I suppose we could solve that feeling right now and have you all move to your respective sides. That way the winners can celebrate. And the losers can commiserate. Full and empty! And then we wouldn't feel like the minority.

But we are not charged to do that. Do you know what we're supposed to do? Hear what we are to do, listen.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this, you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ...Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” (See *Romans 12 and 13*)

Wouldn't it be amazing if we actually CHOSE to believe this stuff?

Elijah believes this stuff. He's hungry. He's thirsty. God says, “Go meet a widow from Zarephath who will feed you.”

You have to love God's sense of humor. Couldn't make it easy. Had to make it hard. Go up to Lebanon, a land filled with foreigners. But when you get there, you'll find that you're a foreigner. Strange how that happens.... And then God doesn't tell Elijah to find the wealthiest person. No, find a widow and ask her for some food.

And Elijah goes. He actually believes this stuff. Imagine believing in God? When God commands us to do something, we actually follow through. When God said, “Love one another” and we actually did it! When God says, “Welcome the stranger.” Okay! Elijah went to a foreign land, of unclean people, and asked for water and food. Is he running on empty?

How about that widow? There, she was gathering sticks to make the last supper for her son and for her. Think about being a mom and having to do that. Would you have room on your agenda to listen to some foreigner who says, “Get me something to drink and give me some food because God of Israel told me that you would do that for me.” She said, “Listen, I've got nothing.”

“Well, the God of Israel said that that jar of flour and that jug of oil you have. That jar of flour will fill right up. That jug of oil will be filled to the brim. Do not be afraid.”

It's kind of a stretch, isn't it? To be empty and believe the Word of God. She did!

I'd like to have been a fly in that room.

I can see Elijah sitting down with that widow's son at the table. The boy just eyeing the stranger. Elijah looks at the boy. Gives him a wink.

In comes the widow with a big, hot, steaming pancake. She cuts the pancake into three pieces. She gives a piece to Elijah and to her son and then to herself. She sits down. And they all take a bite.

And Elijah says to the widow, "You looked, didn't you?"

And the widow raises an eyebrow and smirks... and then smiles. "Well, of course, I looked."

"Were they full?"

"Yes! Yes! The jar and the bottle full!"

Just checking!

And the next morning, for breakfast. The boy and Elijah there at the table. She brought out the pancake, cut it in three. ...

And they sat down. And Elijah opened his mouth. And she said, "Yes! I looked! I looked! Filled again."

For lunch, she came out with three pancakes. "Feeling kind of bold are we?"  
"Feeling hungry, old man!"

How many days would you make pancakes until you quit looking at the miracle? No matter what you use up, it always came back full. I don't know about you, but I'd never tire of that miracle. I'd look every day. Full. Full. Full. Full. Full. Full. Full.

Hear this - God's Word never returns empty. Full... Full... Full... Full.... That woman in North Carolina at Grace Covenant said, "We're near to the end!" No, it'll fill back up, because we are the church. Tears all around. And parents, teach your children that. You can teach them about sports or politics, but when push comes to shove – when there's nothing – tell them about a good shepherd that leads them through the darkest valleys and provides the greenest pastures because that will always come back full. Teach them to love because that will always come back full.

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