

Like rain on the fields

1 Kings 17:1-24

June 9, 2013

How is it with you and God?

Last Wednesday, a building being demolished in downtown Philadelphia collapsed onto a neighboring thrift store, killing six people. Three weeks ago, an EF5 tornado tore through the town of Moore, Oklahoma, killing twenty-four people, and just eleven days later, another EF5 storm, the largest storm on record, swept through Oklahoma City, killing another twenty people.

How is it with you and God?

Your son is still looking for a job. Your daughter's marriage is falling apart. Your aunt has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

How is it with you and God?

It's a good question. It's an important question, because a God who is directly responsible for each and every disaster that befalls this world, a God who wills each and every misfortune that comes into our lives, is a God to be feared, not loved. We'll want to keep our distance from such a God, hoping to stay out of his way, hoping to avoid his attention, always anxious lest we do something -- intended or unintended -- to cause him offense.

But that's a miserable way to live! It would be easier to ignore God altogether, to imagine there is no God at all. But imagining there is no God doesn't make it so, and a godless universe, careening through time and space without purpose or care, is an empty and heartless and despairing place in which to live. There may be no one to blame, but no one either to count on, no one in whom to place our hope.

How is it with you and God? Can you count on God? Can you trust God? Can you love God? Or is there nothing, really, you can count on? Are you just waiting for the next shoe to drop?

The story we heard today from the book of Kings provides some answers to these questions. It's a story about Ahab and Elijah and a widow from Zarephath and her young son, but it is really a story about God, a story about what God does. And what does God do? What does God do?

God causes a drought and kills an innocent little boy.

Isn't that what the story says happened? Doesn't this story confirm our conviction that God is the author of disaster? Or does it?

Who caused the drought?

The fact is there was a drought. There was an extended period of several years without rain, in Israel and throughout the whole region on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In this area of the globe, water is not plentiful, and the land and the people it supports are highly vulnerable to drought and its effects.

The book of Kings remembers the fact of this particular drought, but the concern of the book of Kings is not to record history, but to interpret it. The fortunes of God's people, not so much one by one by one, but all together, are interpreted through the lens of faithfulness to God, faithful obedience to the covenant made between them and the God who chose them. Faithfulness is the path to blessing, to life, to shalom, but unfaithfulness leads to suffering and turmoil and death.

So, according to the book of Kings and its theological interpretation of Israel's history, who caused the drought? Ahab did! Ahab, the king who did more than any other king of Israel to arouse God's anger. Ahab, the king who turned his back on the God who brought his ancestors out of slavery in Egypt, and built instead in Israel's capital city a temple in honor of the storm god Baal. Ahab, the king who murdered a man, one of his own countrymen, just to gain possession of his vineyard.

He was supposed to be like rain on the fields! The king was supposed to be like rain, rain that waters the fields, rain that makes plants grow, rain that brings water that brings life. The king was supposed to bring the people blessing, but he brought them a curse. Ahab was not rain for the people. He was drought!

Israel's kings were supposed to be different. From the beginning, Israel had an ambivalent relationship with its kings. When the people of Israel first asked for king. Samuel told them they didn't need a king, because they already had one -- the Lord was their king! And once they did have kings, the Lord was still to be their true king. Israel's kings were not to be autocrats, making their own plans and enforcing their own rules, but they were to be the Lord's servants, caring for the people, guiding the people according to God's plans and God's rules. Israel's kings were to God's deputies, as it were. They were to be like God, ruling the people with God's own justice, governing the people by God's own righteousness.

And God's justice is this: treating poor people with fairness and equity. The key word in phrase is "poor." God's justice is not merely about treating people generally with fairness and equity, but particularly about treating poor people with fairness and equity. And God's righteousness is this: helping needy people and defending oppressed people.

This is the standard by which Israel's kings were measured. The king was judged by his treatment of Israel's most vulnerable citizens. The government was measured by its success in helping needy people, and in delivering oppressed people from the abuses of their oppressors.

A government is judged by the help and protection and dignity it affords its most vulnerable and needy citizens. How does our own government measure up to this standard?

This is the standard that matters because this is what God is like. God takes the side of the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan, the alien, the stranger. God defends them and provides for them and delivers them.

Then why did God kill that innocent little boy?

Elijah says he did.

*O Lord my God, why have you done such a terrible thing to this widow?
She has been kind enough to take care of me, and now you kill her son!*

"The Lord gives and the Lord takes away," Job said, after the deaths of his ten children.

But did God kill the widow's son? The boy got sick. He got sick and he died. People get sick. People die. Do you believe God is willing, choosing, each illness, each death, one by one by one? I don't. I can't. This is not the God I know and love.

We want to think there are reasons for everything that happens to us, but, much of the time, there are no reasons. We want reasons so we can understand what happens to us, so we can assign blame for what happens to us, so we can try to control what happens to us, but, much of the time, there are no reasons. He got sick. He got worse. And he died.

Disasters happen. Misfortune comes to all of us, but we may be comforted, not in knowing the cause of it all, but in knowing the God who provides in the midst of it all.

If it was Ahab who brought the drought on Israel, and sickness that claimed the life of the child, what did God do? God provided.

God provided food and water and protection to Elijah by Cherith Brook, and when the waters of the brook dried up because there was no rain, God provided for Elijah by sending him to a woman in Zarephath.

God provided food for a widow and her son in the midst of the ubiquitous famine, and when the boy died, God raised him to life in answer to Elijah's prayer. She was a widow. She was poor. She was a stranger. She was an alien, not an Israelite, but God provided for her, because that is what God does. God is righteous. God is just.

The world is full of sadness and misfortune, sickness and disaster and death, but God is righteous and God is just. God takes the side of those who suffer. God takes our side when we suffer, providing help, bringing comfort, restoring life. This is a God we can count on, a God we can trust, a God we can love, a God who is like rain on the fields.

Like rain on the fields ...

That is what Ahab was supposed to be -- like rain on the fields -- but he was not. Who was? Who in this story was like God, like rain on the fields? Certainly not Ahab, and not Elijah. Elijah was the one getting helped, not the one providing help.

The one in this story who is like God is the woman, the widowed foreigner. It was she who believed God's promise, who took the little she had and made an offering of help to a stranger, to Elijah. She was kind to him, like God is kind. She took care of him, like God takes care of us. She was the Lord's servant. She was like rain on the fields.

May we too be like her -- kind, generous, believing, providing, blessing ... like rain on the fields.