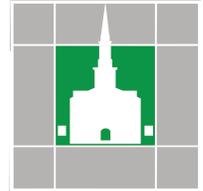


Sustained

Scripture text: 1 Kings 17:1-16
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, November 1, 2020



When you are the bearer of unwelcome news it's good to have some support. A few brave souls who can encourage you when you are speaking out, and who will help pick up the pieces afterwards if you need it—they're really, really welcome.

If you don't have that kind of support, things can seem mighty lonely.

That brings to my mind a comedic masterpiece from way back in 1974, Mel Brooks's film *BLAZING SADDLES*. This story of the 19th Century Western frontier involves a governor in thrall to his corruption-minded attorney general. In order to profit from the building of the region's first railroad, the attorney general wants to steer the rail line away from the small town of Rock Ridge. Since the town doesn't have a sheriff, the attorney general suggests that the governor appoint a Black man to the position and then use a gang of criminals to scare everyone out of town.

When Sheriff Bart arrives in town, his appointment is greeted with hostility. But the local preacher, a hard-boiled prairie man, stands up and counsels tolerance.

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[[film clip]]

Even a man carrying a Bible aren't always enough to sustain an unwelcome witness. Sometimes it's the message we carry, and sometimes it's just the fact that we are who we are.

Gaining trust is hard. When people believe that what they have and who they are is under threat...their power...their resources...their idea of what's proper...they can be drawn to harsh words and outrageous deeds.

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We are living in a time when wagons are circled and bright lines have been drawn. In this past week I have seen and read many words that I never thought would apply to the place where I live. It's not just the pandemic...though that's part of it. It is the rise of groups and ideologies and actions that I believed were put to rest after the Second World War. It is the condoning of those groups and actions by people in power, and the way in which they have become emboldened to act out their hateful ideas in public.

I feel the anxiety surrounding me. Friends and loved ones are telling me that they haven't been sleeping well. A late-night talk show host captured it perfectly for me when he said, "I have the same feeling that I get when I'm waiting for the report on a

biopsy.” We want to know how things will come out, and at the same time we dread knowing how things came out.

At the heart of that anxiety is this: something has changed and we cannot stop it. We fear that if we open our mouths or take a stand that we’ll find ourselves out there, on our own. In a climate like that, speaking up for our own values is hard—really hard. Our anxiety tamps down our voices.

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So imagine for a moment just how brave, or just how clueless, Elijah was. Elijah was literally a nobody when God touched his heart with a prophecy. He was part of a group of settlers in the region of Gideon. He was a farmer. Elijah was a complete unknown around the Temple. He had no standing in town...really no identity or reputation.

But that word...it churned and burned...and it was going to keep doing so until Elijah delivered it to King Ahab. Ahab had married a foreigner, Jezebel, who brought her own religious practices with her. The fertility god Baal was thought to be charge of water and thunder and storms, which made it even higher stakes for the farmer Elijah when he strode into Ahab’s presence and delivered his indictment of rain to the astonished King.

That was enough to send Elijah scampering for safety into the wilderness. But surviving there was an uncertain proposition because of—you guessed it—the drought. All the usual sources of support for a prophet on the run had dried up. So God sends Elijah to hide out at a brook where there is fresh water. And God sends ravens to feed Elijah.

Ravens? Um, you've seen ravens, right? Ravens picking over roadkill, and ravens digging up the scraps left by other animals. Ravens are not exactly nature's source of gourmet provender. But they sustain Elijah, until the water dries up.

When that happens, God sends Elijah to the village of Zarephath. The unnamed widow to whom he is sent does not seem at all happy to see Elijah, even though she has been told by God that she should feed him. She must have been distressed by that message, because she was just about out of food thanks to—yes, the drought. Elijah's cheeky request for something to eat wasn't well received. "We have enough to make just one more meal before we starve to death."

Yet, Elijah is sustained. The widow and her son are sustained. Daring to cross the bright line of scarcity and despair is the only way to survive and to find God's sustaining presence. Living on

God's promises allows Elijah to find the strength he needs to go back to Ahab and speak God's truth to Ahab's corrupt power.

That truth is so consuming that Ahab recognizes it as Elijah is approaching and yells "Go away, you troubler of Israel!"

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Troubler of Israel. Elijah was a good kind of trouble for his times. And we live in times that need some "troubling."

The bright lines that have been drawn may feel intimidating. We may find ourselves wishing that we could be magically swept back into the way things were 30 years ago, when people saw our church and flocked to it for the architecture or the history or the music. Spoiler alert: those times are gone, and it's not happening.

But the times that are here demand our voices in a new way. We know the core of the Good News. We have a word to say. We may feel like "nobodies" who would be foolish to open our mouths. We may feel like we're risking too much by acting: risking our reputations, our wealth, our standing in the community.

But we know the core of the Gospel message, and we have a word to say.

And to speak that word takes each of us, sustained by each of us...sustained by the common meal of bread and cup...sustained

by God's Spirit. It takes those sustaining ties of Christian community to cross those lines and to speak that truth.

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Our ancestors in faith didn't have it any easier than we did. They faced King George, and the challenges of Amistad, and the Civil War, and corrupt business interests, and Charles Lindberg, and Adolph Hitler. They faced their own prejudices. They did not always do it well, but they sustained each other and did the best they could.

Today we are sustained by their faith and their belief in the future. Today we are surrounded by them as we face those bright lines and move through our own anxieties.

May we each find our own way to speak truth to power. May we each find our own way to act on the word that has been planted in us. May we each be sustained by the faith of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. Amen.