

RENEW... REPLENISH

I Kings 17:8-16; Ephesians 4:11-16

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Elijah was a bit of a wild man. He performed miracles, rebuked kings, and killed false prophets. He has been up to his usual antics when we come to today's scene. He's told King Ahab of Israel that there will be a drought because Ahab has welcomed and encouraged the worship of false gods. Apparently the king and Queen Jezebel didn't take it well, so he's been hiding out in a wadi on the other side of the Jordan. A raven brings food and the wadi supplies water, but wadis don't have a continuous source of water. They run when it rains. They dry up when it doesn't.

So God sends Elijah to Zarephath in Sidon, Jezebel's home country. He finds a hiding place under the queen's nose. He finds sustenance in a foreign land under the roof of a widow and her son who are likely worshippers of the same false god that Ahab was promoting back in Israel.

This story is full of ironies. The king of Israel is faithless while a foreign widow is faithful. The prophet is unsafe in his own land, but finds security in enemy territory. The biggest irony is that a little jar has more oil than a major wadi has water after a rainstorm.

Hold that contrast in your mind: a river of rushing water next to a little jar filled with oil. One runs dry. The other holds oil for nearly three years. The explanation for this is very simple. I've been reading a book about water by Jerry Dennis and he has a chapter on rivers. He notes that some rivers have a constant flow to them while others slow to a trickle or even go dry at some point in the year. The difference, of course, is that some rivers have a continuous and plentiful source either from a large body of water like a lake or from what he calls "ground water seepage." Much of the flowing water we see began in water aquifers beneath our feet. The other kind of river is supplied only by rain, snow and ice melt. A wadi is this kind of river. These dry up quickly because rain water always works its way to a larger body of water, sometimes to a lake or an ocean, but mostly to the water table beneath the soil. If you could count on water standing still, Elijah would have had plenty. But it doesn't. It's unreliable. Every farmer knows this.

Now the little jar despite its size served the need because it had a continuous supply. As the widow used it, more would be added. The oil was constantly replenished, because it had a reliable source.

Of course the widow doesn't know this when Elijah first asks her to make a little cake for him. She thinks the jar holds only enough to make something for her and her son before they die. She had no idea that it would supply all her need for the next three years.

We aren't told why she accedes to Elijah's request. Was her despair so deep that she'd given up concern for her own welfare? Or was she compelled by the rules of hospitality to serve her guest's needs first? Perhaps she was afraid of the prophet?

She does the task, for whatever reason, and then she looks... and sees that there is still a little oil and so she makes something for her household and she looks... and sees there is still a little oil and so the next day she makes something for all of them and she looks... and sees that there is still a little oil and so the next day....

Sometimes our lives are like that. Life gets really busy. Work demands a lot. The children require your attention or the parents are being over-protective. You wake up in the morning and you figure you have just enough strength to get through the day, but you're sure it will all fall apart tomorrow. And then you get up the next day and despite the short night, you think you can get through the day. Each day brings its own strength.

The Bible isn't much for leftovers, for accumulating a reserve. In the wilderness the Israelites gather manna each day. They are told to gather only enough for the day. The leftovers spoil, but that's okay because each morning there is new manna.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to ask only for their "daily bread." He told a story about a man who tore down his barns and built bigger ones to store all the stuff he was accumulating. He calls this man a fool for attending to his wealth rather than his soul. In John's gospel, he tells his disciples that her came that they might have "abundant life" but that abundance is about the needs of each day being met. In the Sermon on the Mount he urges his followers to seek first the kingdom and not worry about tomorrow for the needs of the day are sufficient.

Theologians sometimes talk about the providence of God, the idea that God provides. But this provision comes not by building up a reserve but through this mechanism of replenishment. This is not to say that one doesn't plan for the future, but faithfulness has little to do with the size of one's retirement account. You can't accumulate rewards with God. The spiritual life is a daily discipline just as all relationships are whether we're talking about spouses, friends, family, neighbors or even strangers.

We spend our time, energy, and resources tending these relationships. Some days we feel as though we spent our whole self on it. But somehow, we wake up the next day to discover that there is still oil in the jar.

Paul reminds the faithful at Ephesus that God provides for the needs of the community. He gifts those present with a variety talents and resources so that each person can make their own contribution to the health and peace of the body. We're all different, but not in a way that separates us. The oil we bring serves to unite the church, to equip us for ministry, for giving to the world so that each the needs of the faithful and the needs of the world are met. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up... into Christ [and so] promote the body's growth in building itself up in love."

This love is of course the thing that feeds us, quenches our thirst. But it must be renewed daily. And it is God who does this. It is God who is the only reliable source for love. Our supply is kept in a little jar which we must spend because the day requires it. But the morning will come and we'll look again into the jar and there will be oil for us to spend that day and the next morning we'll look again... and there will be oil... and the next morning... Amen.

Resource:

Jerry Dennis. Illustrated by Glen Wolff. *The Bird in the Waterfall: Exploring the Amazing World of Water.* 2014