

I

I'm told that the name Ryan is derived from a Gaelic word that means "little leader" or "little king." I hope I don't come across as a control freak or a dictator, but in general terms, in my life, I like to be "a man with a plan."

But I'm anxious as I stand before you this morning. It feels like there is so much that has happened in 2020 that is far beyond my control, that has upended my plans and expectations for what life will be like. And to me, it feels like with Election Day looming on Tuesday, this coming week will potentially be one that will impact me and everyone I know and love for years, if not decades to come, and it feels like there's so very little that I personally can do about any of it.

II

And I suspect that most of us feel that way this week. Most of us, I think, feel like there are massive forces at work in the world right now, and events are about to transpire that have the potential to impact all of us for years to come, and for the most part, we're just along for the ride.

And for those of us that are people of faith, that feeling of powerlessness can lead us to some tough questions. Where is God in all of this? With all of these things transpiring in the halls of power, does what I do with my life even matter?

And those kinds of questions bring us to our story for today.

III

This Fall, we've been doing a broad overview of the Old Testament, and last week, we were introduced to a King David. Although he wasn't the first king, he's remembered in ancient Israel's memory as the rough equivalent of George Washington. David is remembered as the king who united the twelve tribes of Israel into one unified nation and established the city of Jerusalem as the nation's religious and political capital about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

But that unity did not last long, only about a century or so, and after David's son King Solomon died, the united kingdom fractured in two. And here's where it gets a little confusing if we're not careful. The northern part of the kingdom took the name Israel and set up the city of Samaria as its capital city. The southern part of the kingdom took the name Judah and kept Jerusalem as its capital city. And during the time of the divided kingdom, both Israel and Judah were ruled by their own kings.

Our story this morning is centered on the northern Kingdom of Israel. During the time of the divided kingdom, the northern Kingdom of Israel was incredibly unstable in terms of political leadership. In the span of two centuries, something close to 40 different kings reigned over the northern kingdom, and eight of their reigns ended

due to assassinations. In the biblical book of First Kings, from which we'll take our story this morning, not one of the northern kingdom's kings is celebrated or remembered fondly. According to First Kings, all of them did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

But King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel outdid them all. In fact, the text puts it this way.

Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.

Ouch. Not exactly a glowing review of Ahab's administration. Remember our conversation about the commandments, about God's insistence that God's people remember that God alone is Lord, and that God's people not worship idols or false gods?

Baal was the name of a Canaanite god, who the Canaanites believed was the god of storms and fertility. The Land of Promise is an arid, desert climate, and to this day, the people who live there depend on seasonal monsoon rains to water their crops and livestock and to refill reservoirs to last through the dry season, which is long and hot in that part of the world.

So King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom, with the encouragement of his wife Jezebel, turned away from the God of his ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and went and worshiped a false god and saw to it that a temple was built to honor the Canaanite storm god in his capital city of Samaria.

Within the Old Testament, when kings have gone astray from God's law, usually God sends a messenger to the king to warn them and to attempt to turn the king back to God's ways. Over time, we have come to know these divine messengers by the title of prophets. Oftentimes, we associate prophets as those who predict future events, and there is certainly an element of that in the biblical text, but more often than not, the job of a prophet was to speak God's truth to powerful people who had gone astray from God's ways.

As you might imagine, this was a dangerous job, and oftentimes the life expectancy of a prophet was low. But in today's story, we're going to meet one prophet, a man by the name of Elijah. We don't know much about Elijah's back story or even how he came to be called as a prophet. All we know is that God used him to try and call the king to account for his misdeeds.

So with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from 1 Kings 17:1-16.

1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." 2 The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 3 "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." 5 So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. 7 But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 10 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." 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 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." 13 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. 14 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." 15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

While we know Ahab's and Elijah's names, we don't know the name of the widow or her son. And that's not surprising, since in those days and in that culture, women and children weren't viewed as full human beings made in the image of God, but rather the property of their husbands or fathers. Since her husband was deceased, she and her son had no apparent means of support other than what they could scavenge, and no legal protection whatsoever. On top of all of this, the widow is a resident not of the Land of Promise, but of Sidon, the home territory of Queen Jezebel.

On the surface, Elijah and the widow should have nothing to do with each other. They come from very different places with very different politics. They come from different religious traditions and because of their genders, are treated differently in the public square.

But the impotence of the Cannanite storm god and the impudence of the wayward King Ahab, has, by the providence of the God of Israel, brought them together.

The drought has brought economic devastation throughout the land. And as has been the case since the beginning of time, when the powers that be turn against God's will for the flourishing of all people, the ones who suffer the most are the poorest and most vulnerable.

But in yet another divine reversal, it's not Elijah the prophet of God who saves the poor widow – it's the hospitality and generosity of the poor foreign widow who models the faithfulness and generosity of God. And in those small acts of generosity, in those small acts of hospitality, in those small acts of seeing to it that the basic fundamental needs of every human being are met – the kingdom of God begins to break through. And 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.

IV

My friend, I know that it feels like we are all standing on the edge of something huge this week. I know it feels like there is so much happening on a grand, almost cosmic scale in our world and our nation and that it feels like so much of it is beyond your control.

But here's the gospel news. No matter what happens on Tuesday or in the days that follow, the person in the world who has the most power to shape the events that affect your life and the lives of those whom you love and care about is the one who looks back at you in the mirror.

For months, you've been hearing all about how this week's election is the most important one of your lifetime. For months, candidates and the powers that be in this country have been locked in a struggle and warning that if the other side wins, the plagues of Egypt will seem like a day at the beach compared to what will befall you and those whom you love.

And so my friend, I hope that you'll remember an important biblical principal. Within the grand sweep of the biblical story, very, very rarely in biblical story is the mission of God advanced in the world by the decrees and designs of kings and queens. More often than not, the mission of God in the world is advanced little by little, in simple acts like a drink of water offered to a stranger. More often than not, the mission of God in the world is advanced by stretching the meal and the oil to make one more morsel of bread to share with one who is hungry.

More often than not, the mission of God in the world is carried forth by the people whom you would least expect – a 75 year old man named Abram and his wife

named Sarai who have never been able to bear children nevertheless become the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation.

A convicted murderer with a speech impediment named Moses successfully liberates hundreds of thousands of God's people from bondage.

A foreign widow woman, whose name we will never know, on her way home to make her last meal for herself and her son, shares what little she left has with a prophet of Israel, and the jar of meal was not emptied, and neither did the jug of oil fail.

Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed - it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

He told them that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

My friend, more often than not, the mission of God in the world is not advanced by the decrees of kings and queens, but little by little, in simple, small acts of faith by faithful people.

My friend, if you want to build a nation that is more just, more faithful, more prosperous for all its citizens – if you want to advance the mission of God in the world – it's not likely to start in Washington or Atlanta. The place where that movement will start is with the person who looks back at you in the bathroom mirror.

You are the mustard seed, my friend. Your small acts of hospitality and generosity, repeated day after day and year after year, are what grows into the tree that gives rest to the birds of the air. You are the yeast in the flour, my friend. Your small acts of kindness and your refusal to meet hate with hate and violence with violence, your refusal to give in to fear, are the leaven that gives rise to the flour that makes the cake that gives nourishment to the whole household of God.

V

And I'm mindful that today is All Saints' Sunday. Today is a day when we remember and give thanks for those women and men who have planted the mustard seeds of faith for us – those women and men who have been the yeast that has given rise to the faith we carry today.

In a few moments, we will read the names aloud of those saints who have died and joined the Church Triumphant in the past year, as is our tradition on this day. It is good and fitting that we should do this, because as people of resurrection faith, we proclaim that the line between the living and the dead is not nearly so sharp as the fallen powers and principalities of this world would have us believe.

When we come to this Table, we proclaim that we believe in the communion of the saints, and in our Presbyterian way of being the church, we believe that somehow, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are lifted up in the presence of Jesus and all the saints of the church, both living and dead. When we come to this Table, we proclaim that this is a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet that awaits us all, when we will come from north and south and east and west and sit together in the kingdom of heaven.

And so on this day, we give thanks for the saints of the church, and we remember many of them by name. But we also know that there are saints that have shaped us, that have blessed us, that have sustained us on the way, whose names we will never know this side of heaven. Our culture may call them by many names and labels – widows, foreigners, immigrants, undesirables – but without their acts of faith and generosity and kindness – without their refusal to meet hate with hate and violence with violence – we would not have survived.

And so we come on this All Saints Sunday to this Table where there is enough for prophets and widows and orphans and kings alike. We come to this Table where everyone is welcome not because of their gender or race or citizenship or marital status, but simply because they are a human being made in the spitting image of their heavenly parent. On this All Saints Sunday, we come to this Table where there is enough to go around for everyone, and the jar is not emptied and the jug of oil does not fail, according to the Word of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.