

## Proper 14, Year B

- I've been here at Grace for around a month and a half, and without doubt the most common question I've gotten during that time is, "how are you getting settled in?"
- Taken a little time, but I think I speak for all of our family when I say I think we're finally getting there
- Best part of feeling a little more settled is that getting settled takes a **lot** of energy - looking forward to using all the energy that settling in has taken and focusing on other things - things like the program year and all that that entails
- And, of course, doing this just in time to take vacation - leaving Wednesday for Maine, back end of August
- But before leaving, I thought the readings today presented the perfect opportunity - now that I've started to turn my attention to what's next - because our reading today, about Elijah, is one that I think extends an invitation to us - an invitation that most of us probably don't want to receive, maybe, but an invitation that I would like to extend to all of you - and that is an invitation to fail
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- I'll come back to that, but first, I want to tell a little bit of a story - another important story of our faith - the story of Elijah, the prophet of God
- Elijah's story more or less ends in the reading that we hear today - but it begins with evil king - named Ahab - marries Jezebel and worships Baal - he's described as doing more evil than all the kings who came before him
- Elijah's story is in some ways very much like the miraculous feeding stories we've heard the past two weeks in lectionary - when he's first called, told to predict a drought to king Ahab, and does - then goes into the wilderness where ravens bring him food
- Lot of icons of Elijah have him being fed by ravens
- Then commanded to go to Zarephath - widow there who will feed him - he asks for bread and she says she only has a handful of meal and a little bit of oil in a jug - says that her plan is to take it home and make it for herself and her son - so that they can eat this last little bit of their food, and then die
- And here, God is as God has always been - God is just as we've heard for the past two weeks - Elijah tells the widow, make me a little cake of it, and then you and your son eat, and it will not run out until the rains come again - in other words, until she's able to feed herself and her son again

- And wouldn't you know it, Elijah was right - God made that tiny bit of meal, those few drops of oil - last until the drought ended
- It's a shame sometimes the lectionary works the way it does - if Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is an unfamiliar story, it's a good one to know right as we hear about the feeding miracles of Jesus - feeding of the 5,000 - because as miraculous as it is, what Jesus does in feeding 5,000 people with just two fish and five loaves - part of what that miracle does is say - God is up to what God has always been up to! - providing for God's people - what God does **in** Christ in that moment is not wildly different from what God did **through** Elijah previously
- And then the widow's son becomes ill, and dies - and Elijah prays to God, asking God, "why would you let this happen? Why would you keep this family safe through all this drought, this famine, only to have this woman's son die right as it was about to end?"
- And God listens to Elijah, and gives Elijah the power to revive the widow's son
- You can start to see how this Elijah story is important, right? How it foreshadows a lot of what is to come in Christ? This is why it drives me a little crazy when people talk about "the OT God" versus "the NT God" - they're the exact same God! Doing the exact same things, just in a slightly new way - steadily growing closer and closer to us, God's people!
- After all this, being fed in the wilderness and then fed by the widow reviving her son, Elijah is told to go once more to Ahab and tell him now that the drought is going to end - just to announce it so that Ahab actually knows who's doing it
- So Elijah meets Ahab's servant, who's actually a little nervous about taking him to king Ahab, since Ahab blames Elijah for the drought in the first place - in fact, when he sees him, Ahab says, "is it you, troubler of Israel?"
- And Elijah answers, "I haven't troubled Israel, but you have, because you're worshipping a false God"
- So Ahab arranges a competition of sorts - a way of settling the question of who the true God is - Baal or the Lord
- So atop Mount Carmel they construct two massive wooden altars and they take two bulls - Elijah says to all 450 of the assembled prophets of Baal - choose your bull, and put it on the altar and pray to Baal to set it on fire - and they pray and pray, from morning into the afternoon, but nothing happens
- And Elijah has them pour water all over his altar until it's dripping, basically sitting in a pool of water - and then prays to the Lord - 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let

it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.'

- And the Lord sets the altar aflame - consumes the offering and the altar and even the water the altar was sitting in with flames - and Elijah tells the people to put the false priests to death - and then, there on Mount Carmel, heavy rains come to signal the end of the drought, the end of the famine
- And Jezebel, angry with Elijah for showing up her God and putting Baal's prophets to the sword, promises to get revenge on Elijah
- **All of that** takes place in a few short chapters and sets the stage for the readings we have this morning - Elijah predicts start and end of drought/famine, was fed by ravens sent from God, saw the miracle of God making abundance where there seemed to be only scarcity, revived a dead son, and demonstrated conclusively that Baal is false and that there is only one God - the LORD
- And for that, Jezebel swears that she will get Elijah
- Elijah saw his mission as converting Ahab and Jezebel, of calling Israel to repent and return to the LORD - and in that, he wasn't successful
- Elijah... is rightfully pretty upset
- He's become what comes to be the sort of prototype of what a prophet should be, he's witnessed more miracles than just about anyone else in history, he's worked many of them with his own hands
- But God seemed to set him on a path that was headed one direction - toward getting the kingdom of Israel to repent, and turn back to God - and in that one, most important task, he failed utterly - and he is angry - so angry that God has to send angels to feed him for forty days and forty nights, because he's too upset, too depressed by his failure to function
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- Important for a couple reasons - failed despite doing everything right - sometimes even when we do everything perfectly we still fail
- Also managed to do something else entirely - setting out the example of what a prophet should be - how to interpret will of God - lay out the pattern that all of us are to follow - in other words, even though he failed at what he would've thought his primary task - he became known for something he never dreamed of
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- If we want to be followers of God, I think we have to get more comfortable than we are with failure
- You all probably know more stories than I do about people who failed over and over again before eventually becoming wildly successful, or eventually finding someone who listened to their idea, or who eventually hit upon one brilliant discovery...
- But there's one major problem with holding those stories up as Christian examples: we aren't guaranteed success
- Instead, we follow in the footsteps of a prophet who worked miracles the likes of which few have ever even seen - and yet was ignored by the powerful of his time - did everything he was supposed to do - and yet failed at his primary task
- We follow a Messiah who was not only the Anointed One of God, but God made flesh indeed, - and yet was put to death
- So no, we aren't guaranteed success in the way that, say, the average 21st century American might define it
- Instead we're guaranteed something greater
- We're guaranteed that in the waters of Baptism we are washed clean of everything about ourselves that isn't godly, set free from the chains that hold us back
- We're guaranteed that in bread and wine made body and blood we are knit together into something greater than ourselves, something greater than we could ever dream, something divine - that we truly are what we eat
- We're guaranteed that by the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, God can use us to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine
- That may not make us successful, but it can certainly change the world
- So as we settle into the coming year together - just like Elijah, let's dare together, dream big together, let's never be content together and yes, let's fail together
- Because even if we do, God will Work wonders through us