

Marginal stories

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The story of the widow of Zarephath and Elijah is bracketed by two other stories that are excluded from the lectionary and are therefore never heard by many people in our congregations. Both of them concern the deviant monarchy under which the widow and her child live.

At the end of 1 Kings 17, Ahab assumes his reign, and the first major project under his rule is the construction of Jericho. The builder kills his two young sons and buries their bodies in the foundation of the city. This was an ancient practice of child sacrifice forbidden by the God of the Israelites but accepted by King Ahab.

The second story on the margins of the lectionary—immediately following Elijah's encounter with the widow—shows King Ahab's response to the widespread drought that afflicts his land. The king sends his officials on a mission in search of any surviving grain. It's not in order to feed the hungry, however, but to nourish the darlings of Ahab's economic agenda: his war horses.

These are the stories that surround the widow, her child and the prophet. What hidden sacrifices lie at the base of our own urban and national building projects? What of those buried invisibly in our prisons? If we see the widow as a model of one who risks trust in God's prophetic word and prodigal generosity in the face of scarcity, what stewardship risks might God want us to take? What stories have been pushed to the margins of our stewardship choices? What stories might we be called to bring to the center of our community's awareness?