

Tough questions

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Biblical narrative evokes the emotional depth of human experience and brings forward core questions about life. In this week's Old Testament reading, the widow fully expects to die—and soon, because of a drought in the land. Her plan is to gather a couple of sticks, build a fire, cook up her last handful of grain with a little oil, eat it and die—and her son will eat and die with her. What happens instead raises questions about life and death, relationship and communal sharing, abundance and scarcity, the unpredictability of illness, the fleeting nature of justice, human doubts and the faithfulness of God.

The widow surrenders to the inevitability of her own starvation. Elijah acknowledges this and doesn't try to talk her out of it. He says, "Go and do as you have said." But he also subverts her plan with an interruption: "But first". . .do this other thing. Just introduce this small change into your plans for the day.

Feed me before you feed yourself, Elijah suggests. Share, even from your scarcity. Then feed yourself and your son. He also gives the widow two reassurances: do not be afraid, and there will be enough. It seems unbelievable and miraculous that the widow and her family do not run out of food. In how many situations would this outcome occur? When does communal sharing turn scarcity into abundance? How might the arc of this story resonate (or not) with the lives of people whose situations are quite different from the circumstances of the widow and her son?

They don't die of starvation, so God is good, right? Life is looking up. God is faithful and powerful; the prophet's word is to be trusted. Life is rescued from the jaws of death. This is a good place to end the made-for-TV movie—but the story goes on. The son gets sick and dies (or at least stops breathing).

Everyone is baffled. The widow blames her guest and blames herself, thinking that her past sin that brought this on and that it's the prophet's fault that God noticed this sin. Elijah is baffled and perhaps a little angry with God. "You repay this

woman's generosity by killing her son?" What kind of justice is that?

Who is to blame when illness strikes? Who is to blame when the rains don't come for months and famine hits the land? Where is God? Elijah's cries are cries of lament. He does not take the accusations of the widow personally, but he draws to her side. He takes action on behalf of her and her son by trying to resuscitate the son. Elijah uses his own power to try to do the work he expects from God. Did he become the hands and feet of God?

The story offers no easy answers, but if you read all the way through verse 24, it does show the cyclical nature of life, with both suffering and redemption, death and resurrection. It tells a people's story of their relationship with God and with each other. As people of hope, we preach hope and tell stories of hope—not because suffering does not exist but to help us chart a path through the complexity and challenge of life. How will we react when faced with similarly heartbreaking situations?