

“What God sees”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 1, 2019

1 Kings 17:8-24

by Patrick David Heery

Sometimes what the world sees and what God sees are two different things.

What the world saw in 1928 was a 16-year-old boy born into the extremes of rural poverty, violence, and segregation. A child whose black skin and tattered clothing led one of his school teachers to tell him that college would be a waste of money. An orphan, his mother dead at age 14, out on the cold streets of Minnesota, homeless and starving. A nameless face, pitiable and dangerous, staring through fogged windows filled with roast hams and holiday turkey.

So saw the world.

What God saw was Gordon Parks, the future photographer for *Life* magazine. A writer. A composer. An artist. A filmmaker. A child with parents whose love for him ran so deep that it sheltered him from the knowledge of poverty until his mother's death. A self-taught photographer who, with a second-hand camera, opened the eyes of Americans to both the suffering and the strength of their nation's poor. A warrior for civil rights and dignity, for compassion and humanity.

So saw God. Long before the world ever knew the name Gordon Parks.

“Sometimes it's the people no one imagines anything of who do the things that no one can imagine,” says Alan Turing in the film *The Imitation Game*.

What's really awful, though, is when we start seeing *ourselves* through the eyes of the world, not the eyes of God.

Whose eyes do you think Elijah was looking through when he first saw that widow, gathering sticks beyond the safety of the city gate?

Did he think God had made a mistake sending him to this woman for food?

I can tell you what the world likely saw. It saw a charity case, another of the vulnerable and unwanted bound to die. It saw gaunt, sun-scorched skin, protruding ribs, hands trembling from dehydration. It saw weakness.

In fact, the Hebrew word for *widow* resembles the word meaning “to be mute.”

And this is whom God chooses to shelter and nourish the prophet Elijah. This is whom God chooses to *save* Elijah.

Trusting in God's eyes, Elijah sets aside his initial misgivings and asks for water. The widow gets him some water. But he needs more. He, like the widow, is also starving. So he asks for some food. But this time, the widow says, no. She barely has enough for her and her son. In fact, she has so little food that she has resigned herself to dying.

How easy it would have been for Elijah in this moment to decide that God was wrong and the world right. This widow's no savior.

We've been where Elijah is standing, haven't we? That time when you think that something new is going to give you what you've been missing, only to discover that it doesn't have what we're seeking any more than we do.

Indeed, I wonder how many people have stumbled into a church, hoping to be fed by the bread of life, wanting to encounter God and to have their lives changed in a whirlwind of love, only to discover people like this widow, people who *have* given their lives, who have felt the force of that whirlwind, but who have been so bowed under by the struggle to survive, to keep the church afloat in our own cultural drought, that they don't have the energy to give what this stranger seeks.

These are moments when we look at ourselves and think, "There's not enough."

Has the world told us so many times that the church, the gospel itself, is irrelevant and dying that we have come to believe it ourselves?

Well, Elijah for one refuses the world's way of thinking. Sounding much like an angel, Elijah says, "Do not be afraid." He says there will be enough for all three of them. In fact, he says there will be enough until the rain returns.

But that's not the end of the transformation. When the widow's son is dying or perhaps already dead (the text is unclear), she goes to Elijah and argues with him. This is not a silent, powerless victim; this is a woman who is ready to fight for life and God's promises.

Moved by her plea, Elijah confronts God and heals, or perhaps even resurrects, the boy.

By the end of this passage, we see two seemingly powerless victims of the world's politics and deprivation become feisty agents of resurrection.

Elijah and the widow learn they have power they never realized they had. The truth is that the widow was always a fighter. What do you think kept bringing her out into the dangerous area beyond the city wall? Or what do you think drove her to argue with Elijah when he asked for food?

The widow always had more power than she or the world knew. But God knew. Elijah was simply the messenger to make sure the widow knew, in the same way that God placed a camera in Gordon Parks's hands to make sure he knew.

The places God sends us, the people and gifts God puts in our lives, aren't there simply to feed us; they are there to help us discover that we are already fed, already strong, already capable of life beyond imagining.

The same that is true for our personal lives, for Elijah and the widow, is true also for the church.

It is tempting in many churches to see newcomers and new mission projects and creative worship approaches as yet more demands on what we don't have enough of as it is. What would happen if instead we saw these strangers as angels from God sent to tell us that there is more here than we yet perceive? And what would happen if those dreamers and visitors didn't just turn away the moment the church doesn't live up to their expectations but instead stayed to help us create that vision?

Perhaps together we will learn to believe and live again. We will discover that we too are feisty agents of resurrection, combating the forces of death not only here within these walls but out there too, in the community, in the prisons, in the homeless shelters and the soup kitchens, in the homes where children are abused, in the schools where far too many kids never expect to graduate, in the basements where our own children shoot heroin, in the lakes and streams and forests where we deplete and pollute God's earth, in all the places where there's not enough.

I can tell you what will happen, because it's happened before. The powerless and the mute will discover that they have a voice, that they are strong, and that they belong to God.

The world's perception will be supplanted by God's. For where the world sees scarcity, God sees abundance. And where it sees a broken and crumbling church, God sees a fire waiting to be kindled, a fire of gospel and salvation and love and mute widows who speak and prophets who resurrect.

All we have to do is look with the eyes of God.

Indeed, that is our theme for the coming year: Be Thou Our Vision. So often we look at this church, or ourselves, and think: it's not enough: "I'm too old. Too young. Too ill. Too tired. Too poor. We're too few. Too many empty pews. Too great a need." And maybe we'd be right if we tried to do it alone. But when we come together, as Elijah, the widow and her son came together, when we are in the presence of God, it is possible. With God, there will be enough. That's our stewardship campaign theme this year. It's about money, but also time, energy, passion, love. It's about believing that God can do something mighty with what we have. We need simply look with the eyes of God. **Amen.**