

June 6, 2010  
Luke 7:11-17  
1 Kings 17:8-16

## On Empty

When it comes to gas tank maintenance, there are two schools of thought. There are the quarter-tankers, the people who cannot stand it if the gas gauge gets below the one quarter mark. They are a vigilant type, a plan-ahead type, and they will tell you that the ¼ tank rule is the best way rule for life. But then there are those with a different view. Who will let that gas gauge get all the way down to E, the empty-tankers. Who believe that you shouldn't mix old gas and new gas. And that there's really more in there and the challenge is to see how far you can get the needle to go before it really does mean Empty. And these folks, of course, drive us quarter-tankers crazy. I've gotten nauseous driving with these people. Because I am terrified that the car is going to run out of gas any second. And that gas station we passed is the last one for 20 miles. And the car will die and we'll have to pull over to the shoulder and walk all the way back there. And as we are walking by the road, a psychopath whose just gotten out of prison will kidnap us and put us in

his basement. All because someone insisted on driving with the gas gauge on E and thought we could make it.

I remember something like this happening during one of our family vacations. Not the psychopath part, but the white-knuckle, empty-tank, coasting on fumes part. We were driving across Wyoming somewhere, where it's like 50 miles between exits. And my dad had decided that he was not stopping for gas at a particular exit because he believed the prices there were just too high. So we kept going. The next exit came, no gas stations. Next exit, there were gas stations, but they had been boarded up since 1920. We were getting closer and closer to empty. The needle was creeping down below the E, almost ready to lose contact with it altogether. Just a few more miles. Just a little bit further. A little bit further. Oh, I hope we can make it. I hope we can make it. I hope we can make it.

Fortunately we did. And some of you who run your cars on empty are thinking, of course you did, you bunch of worry warts. But I'm telling you, those moments when we were praying for the gas tank, they weren't any picnic. Not with all the stress and worry and the why didn't

you stop and are you sure you're reading the map right? And I knew we should have gotten a Pacer instead of this gas guzzler. And if you hadn't been so cheap and if you hadn't insisted on going to that restaurant. And you know what happens when you're that stressed and you don't know if you will make it. You are running out of gas. And you are running out of patience and humor. You are running out of everything except for irritation and anger start to fill up all the space.

Maybe you have been there. Maybe you've had one of those nearly-out-of-gas moments. When you aren't sure if you'll make it to the next stop. If you have, then you'll know what the prophet Elijah is facing in our lesson for today from 1 Kings. Elijah is almost out of gas. He is almost out of everything. Out of friends, out of support, out of food and water. His tank is done past the empty mark and he is out in the middle of nowhere in Zarepheth, and he has pulled up to a poor widow whose got nothing herself. Nothing. The situation is dire. Neither one of them is going to make it.

But let's get the full story here about how Elijah ended up in the middle of nowhere with an empty tank. It's not because he got lost or forgot to

fill up. No, Elijah is here with nothing because he has brought Israel down to that empty mark. Elijah the prophet brought this on. He announced there would be a drought. A drought from God frustrated by the empty words and promises of God's people. A drought that would empty their lives and sharpen their ears and make them turn back. Turn back to God, because their lives were about everything but God. If you look at the name of the book where this reading comes from, you'll know why. (what's the reading say?) This is the period of Kings. But it's long after King David and King Solomon. Israel has had a series of mostly bad kings (with a few exceptions) for about three or four hundred years. And over time, the people have been corrupted by power and wealth. They have started serving other gods. They have stopped being God's people to be more cosmopolitan and worldly, for money and empire and the politics of business and war. Their faithfulness to God is on empty. So God sends prophets like Elijah to help the people remember who they are and who they are meant to be.

Elijah comes during the reign of King Ahab, a particularly nasty king.

The Bible says Ahab did more to provoke the Lord's anger than all the

kings of Israel before him. He lied and stole and cheated and with his wife Jezebel, he began to worship other gods. Right next to the sanctuary for God, he built a sanctuary for Baal and the people, they thought it was lovely and they approved. But God did not. So God sent Elijah to say this: “Hey, Ahab, there is going to be a drought. An empty land for an empty people, who have run dry on commitment to the Lord and it’s not going to let up until I give the word.” Of course, this did not go over well with Ahab, who had a tendency to kill people who pointed out his flaws. So God hid Elijah in a gully in the desert where he got by. Until the stream ran dry because hey, there was a drought. So Elijah was sent to look for water and food and shelter far away in Zarepheth, near Jezebel’s hometown, as far from home as you can get. So much for the perks of being a prophet.

On the way there, I can imagine Elijah watching the needle on his fuel gauge drop lower and lower, drifting closer and closer to the empty mark. And he’s got no place to fill up, no rest stops to rest at; and he got here because of a stupid king’s arrogance and the people’s indifference and God’s jealous streak and his stupid moral principles and if only they

wouldn't and if only he hadn't. You know how things get when you don't know if you're going to make it. And so he coasts into Zarepheth on a wing and a prayer, hoping for a miracle.

But what Elijah gets is a widow. Now the person telling us this story wants us to know that we are at the bottom of the tank. I mean, the needle is past E by now. There's no way Elijah's going to make it. It's a widow, a widow that's his only hope. And everyone knows that widows aren't the ones who rescue people. They aren't the heroes in the stories.

Widows are the ones who NEED heroes. They need righteous men to come and save them. Just like the widow of Nain in our story from Luke. Jesus saves this widow by raising her son. Because a woman with no husband and no son is doomed. She has no security, no support. No one to provide for her in a world where women couldn't be alone.

Without a family, they quickly fell into poverty. Like so many single working moms today trying to survive on minimum wage jobs, with no summer vacation and no paid leave to take care of sick kids, always struggling to stay above the empty line. But it's not easy. Which is why in the Bible God tells the people to care for widows. Overlooked,

excluded, always praying that they will make it. And for widows in Zarepheth during a recession, with a bad economy and a drought going on, well, you can bet there was next to no one to help them.

Our widow here needs a hero. She needs someone to save her, her and her little son. But instead, she gets the prophet Elijah who's got nothing to give. Who is in need himself of a sip of water and a morsel of bread. Who needs her help. Though all she has is one last meal for her and her son. A last meal before they die, a last meal that has been a long time coming. How could he take it away? So, if you'll excuse me, Mr.

Prophet, she says, I've got one last little bit for me and my son. There's no more to share.

No one in this story has anything left. Not Elijah, not the widow, not her son. It looks like God's efforts are a washout. Everyone is on empty.

There isn't enough food. And the water has all dried up. And it's one thing after another. And there isn't enough. There isn't enough to share.

No money to make it through the end of the month. No jobs, no promotions. No time with that packed schedule. No energy after all the hours you put in. There's only so much and with what you've got you

aren't sure you're going to make it. You aren't sure about your health. Your retirement. Your marriage. Your kids. Your finances. Your friends who've changed. Your teacher who has it in for you. Your future that has tanked. That needle is stuck on E no matter what you do, and all you can think is "if only I had and why didn't I? and I'm not going to make it.

It seems like this is it for Elijah and the widow. There is only a dusting of flour left in her jar and a drip or two of oil. They are both out of luck and yet Elijah says to her, Do not be afraid. Go and make me something and make something for you and your son. As if there isn't nothing left. And with some kind of faith, the widow decides to share what she has. Maybe with a sigh. Maybe a pit of grief in her stomach. Maybe with a wing and a prayer. This widow who can't afford hospitality, who is unable to feed herself and her son and will soon die, she manages to love her neighbor as herself. With nothing to spare and nothing to lose, a miracle happens. And the flour doesn't run out and the oil doesn't fail. And Elijah and the widow and her son eat for many days.

There are so many people on empty. People around us who don't have a lot left. Who are widows with empty chairs and parents with empty nests. Neighbors and friends and coworkers and people we see every day who have so little hope and joy and nourishment. Who are living through a drought of anything good and they don't know if they will make it. Who are drained by what the world says they have to do.

Trapped by the demands of what everyone says life should be. By what you can have and what you can get if you just worship this god over here and that god over there. Leaving our spirits hungry and parched. With so little to give one another. Little patience, little grace. All there is, is fear and doubt that we won't make it.

But maybe if we share a little bit of what we've got left. If come and sit around this table together, as broken as we are and as empty as we are.

Maybe the Lord will get us through this together. On a wing and a prayer. Maybe if we share this bread, maybe it won't run out. Maybe God will provide and maybe we will make it through this. And that little bit of grace and love will be more than enough.