

Sermon: Jug Bottom

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Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Like many people my age, I'm a big fan of the television series "Friends." You know the one with Ross, Rachel, Phoebe, Monica, Chandler and Joey. Usually, I say my favorite character is Phoebe, and that's still true, but I can't deny that I always loved Rachel's arc over the course of the series. To go from spoiled girl who never worked a day in her life, to an unemployed woman who'd left that life behind and to claw her way up through hard work and determination from a really bad waitress in a coffee shop and find her way to independent woman working her dream job – well, it is a bit inspiring, is it not? As someone whose life also did not go as planned in my 20s and early 30s, I definitely resonate with her story.

At one memorable moment in the series, Rachel hits what she thinks is a real low point... and then it gets worse. She says, "I really thought I hit rock bottom. But today, it's like there's rock bottom, 50 feet of crap, then me." I have to laugh because I've been there. Raise your hand if you can relate to this feeling. Who here hasn't at some point in their life hit a real low point? A point at which you look around and think, "It can't get any worse than this!" And then... somehow, it does. I think many of us had moments like this in the last few years as we lived through a pandemic and I would wager that some of us feel that way today. It's tough out there and sometimes it feels like there's no hope it will get any better. And that, my friends, is why I study history... because when we study history, when we look back at stories from our past, we can see that we've been here before and that, while it may be tough right now, it's been tough before. Much tougher, in fact, in many instances. And when we have a long view of history, we can see that eventually, whatever the difficulty, we do come out of it.

Stories from the past have enormous value, whether they're 100% factual or not. There are many who believe what is retold in the books of the scripture is literal, factual truth. That everything in this book took place exactly as it has been described. They believe

this and then tell me that this is their favorite book. And whenever people tell me that the Bible is their favorite book, I almost always ask why. I ask this because, while there are some incredible stories in here, true or not, there are also many horrific ones I wouldn't have included had I been in charge of compiling a book of hope, faith, and love. Most of the book of Judges, if I'm honest, would have been excluded from my vision of a book of faith. This book is really a series of books and those books serve different purposes, are written by different people, and intended for different audiences. It is a good book—but it's also filled with many stories that aren't so good and nice. Is the Bible my favorite book? No. Do I think everything in here happened exactly as it has been reported? Let me say this: I think of the Bible as a collection of stories that give us a roadmap to deepening faith, closer relationship with God and with one another, as well as helping us get through the tough stuff. So for me, it doesn't matter if everything in here is 100% factual because I believe it contains irreplaceable lessons for a life of faith.

That's why when I teach confirmation, I am less concerned with how much the teens can regurgitate back to me from this book and more about their faith formation. What did *you* learn from this story? What does it mean for your relationship with God and your relationship with others? For those of us who seek a growing relationship with God throughout our lives, and I hope that includes you, that's what we should consider when we think about these stories. That's their historical value.

Whether it is 100% accurate or not, when we read about the prophet Elijah and the widow from 1 Kings... we should ask, what is this story trying to teach me? Well, let's take a closer look, shall we? In our story today, we find the prophet Elijah escaping to the wilderness after having delivered some rather bad news to the king. In this time of drought and famine, he takes up camp by a brook. God tells him to rest, and he does. After some lovely vignettes including miracle ravens bringing him his food, we find out that Elijah's brook has dried up and he knows he must go in search of food and water. God tells him to go to Zarephath in Sidon. Along the way, God says, he will stumble across a widow and she will feed him.

A widow in this time would not have been a woman of any means. She would have been one of those outsiders Jesus becomes so fond of later in the story. Elijah may at first have wondered why a widow would be any help to him, but above all things, Elijah trusts God and so he goes. Keep in mind that Elijah must, by this time, look a bit wild. More than a bit, I would wager. He's unkempt, filthy, and looks as a person might if they were living outdoors for a period of time without the shelter of a home and being fed by wild birds. So, imagine what the widow must think, when, in Zarephath, Elijah does, stumble upon her. Now the widow is out gathering sticks so that she can cook. She must see this wild man of the wilderness and think: who on earth is this man? What does this ghastly character want from me? She must be afraid, and because of that Elijah must tell her not to be afraid. First, he asks her for some water, which she generously gives. But when he pressed for food—well that's when it gets sticky because, you see, the widow has hit a bit of rock bottom, herself, or rather *jug bottom*. She's got only enough flour and enough oil for one small loaf of bread. This nearly empty jug is going to provide their final meal, she says, as she expects they will perish not long after. That's when Elijah says something even he might not fully be on board with: use your last oil and flour to make *me* a loaf of bread and then Lord will provide what is needed for you to have enough to eat until the rain falls again.

Dubious, perhaps, the widow nonetheless follows the prophet's instructions. She bakes him some bread and then prepares to bake some for herself and her son and... not only did the oil and the flour not run out, just as Elijah predicted, but she had enough for her household for many days. That's quite a miracle, isn't it? I think many novice bread bakers during the early stages of the pandemic wish they had bottomless jars of flour, huh?

But that's not the end of the story, if you'll remember, rock bottom isn't rock bottom. Sometimes, there's rock bottom, then 50 feet of crap, then then you. And that's what happens here, because sometime after that, while Elijah is still staying with the widow and her son, the son dies. She, of course, blames Elijah—and maybe Elijah blames

himself a bit, because he scoops up the son and takes him to the room where he has been staying and he prays over him. He cries out to God because he has told this woman that they will live. He got her to bake him bread to keep him alive, assuring her in part that they will be okay. The Lord will provide.

The widow is now not just a woman who has lost her spouse, but a mother who has lost her child. She's not just at rock bottom, she's certainly not on the mountaintop, this, I think, puts her below those 50 feet of crap that are below rock bottom. She has never been so low.

But you only need to come back once from rock bottom or lower to know that, at that your lowest point, there's nowhere to go but up. "Rock bottom," wrote the author Glennon Doyle, "is always the beginning of newness. It hurts and it's painful, and then there's the waiting—where you don't know what the hell is going on and you don't think any of it is going to make any sense and then... there's the rising."

First the pain, then the rising.

When the Widow's son dies, she must think her world is ending. That's when Elijah strains for God's intervention and God does, indeed, intervene. Breath returns to the son's body, he is resurrected, and Elijah returns him to his mother, alive. This is rebirth at rock bottom. New life born in the valley, not at the mountaintop.

First the pain, then the rising.

When the Israelites feet are tired from wandering in the dessert, their grumbling tummies have them begging to go back to captivity in Egypt where at least, they will have some food. At their lowest moment when they're sure they will perish that's when Moses and God intercede and manna rains down from the skies.

First the pain, then the rising.

When the disciples think that all is lost, that their Lord is gone, they return to fishing from their boats only to find that there are no more fish to catch. They believe that things

can't possibly get any worse: that's when Jesus appears to them walking across the water and their nets again fill with fish.

First the pain, then the rising.

In the midst of devastating attacks and destruction both here and abroad during WWII as the world was mired in global conflict, when everything was falling apart and it seemed the world was ending, leaders from around the world banded together to find paths to end the war.

First the pain, then the rising.

When a caterpillar encloses himself in the cocoon, turns into a big pile of goo on the branch, his old body dying, his life is over: that's when he emerges as a beautiful butterfly.

First the pain, then the rising.

Even that 50 feet of crap Rachel is below isn't enough to keep her down. She'll go through some very relatable (and not so relatable) things... it is, after all, a sitcom. But she, too, will experience that same moment of rebirth.

First the pain, then the rising.

Because no matter how tough things may be right now, no matter how painful, no matter how cloudy the future seems, what the Bible, history, science, and yes, even sitcoms teach us is that there was a before this moment and there will be an after. If you feel like you're at rock bottom, or maybe beneath that 50 feet of crap, remember that newness happens at that place. God isn't just with us on the mountaintop, my friends; God lays down beside us in the valleys. In fact, as so many of the stories in these books can attest: God does some of God's best work in those valleys. If you're at the bottom of your last jug of oil, friends, take heart. God meets us there, too. Amen.