

Proper 5  
Year C 2016

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

We hear first today, a continuation of the story of Elijah,  
a prophet sent by God.

Just prior to today's text,  
we learn that Elijah is called by the Lord  
to speak truth to King Ahab.

Now some scholars refer to Ahab  
as the worst Israelite King  
to gain the throne during the reign of Asa in Judah.

Elijah informs Ahab that until God wills it,  
through the words of Elijah,  
there shall be a drought.

This is a sign to the people  
that there is only one King to be worshipped  
and it most certainly is not Ahab.

The Lord sends Elijah on a journey  
and we pick up the story today  
with the Lord commanding him  
to seek out a widow in Zarephath.

The Lord tells Elijah that  
the widow has been commanded to feed him.

But when Elijah arrives and asks the widow for food  
he learns that she is down to her last meal,  
literally,  
and she is just about to prepare the last meal for her and her son.

Well, this must have come  
as something of a surprise to Elijah  
given that God has told him the widow would feed him.

Elijah, instead of encountering a household with abundance,  
has landed right in the middle of desperation and profound poverty.

The widow has just informed Elijah that  
she and her son are suffering from starvation  
and, in fact, are on the brink of death.

Elijah, after assessing the severity of the situation,  
takes charge and assures the widow that  
the Lord will not let her jar of meal  
and jug of oil run out until the drought has ended.

But, in the end,  
the food supplied over the next several days  
is not sufficient to maintain the health of her son.

He succumbs to illness and the death that  
his mother had envisioned when Elijah first arrived.

As a widow alone with a child to feed and care for,  
this woman has surely seen her share of misery.

For a woman in this time to lose her husband,  
the only means of income and protection,  
is akin to a death sentence.

Sadly, it is equally the case  
for many women around the globe  
and here in the United States as well,  
even in 2016.

And then Luke, introduces us to yet another widow,  
who lived in Nain many years later.

A woman who has just lost her only son as well.  
Her only hope of protection and sustenance is no more.  
Her child is dead.

It is apparent that the condition of women  
had not changed much in those intervening years  
and again, for many, it has yet to change in their countries even today.

Jesus, encounters the widow on his way into Nain,  
and the widow,  
overwhelmed with her grief and fear,  
does not even see Jesus and his followers as they approach.

But Jesus recognizes her desolation and grief  
and without any request or plea from the widow,  
Jesus brings the son to life with one touch of his bier.

The poor, foreigners, orphans and widows  
are characterized by Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War*,

*as “being in a state of precarity in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death”*

According to a recent study  
by the Department of Housing and Urban Development,  
here in the United States,  
there were 306,000 people  
over the age of 50 living on the streets in 2014.

This is the most recent data available.

These figures show a 20% jump since 2007.

Now, my experience in working with the homeless here in Denver suggests that that number most likely has risen even higher over the last two years.

Those over the age of 50 now make up 31% of the nation's homeless population.

Surely, as one of the most vulnerable populations in our country, these people would fall into the populations Judith Butler speaks of as essentially falling through the cracks and without benefit of the safety nets they so desperately need and deserve.

Now, I will admit that this hits way to close to home for me because I'm in this age group.

I'm also keenly aware of the crisis we face in Denver and other areas of Colorado regarding affordable housing.

Those on fixed incomes are being squeezed out of housing and onto the streets.

Colorado is ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in states that require the highest incomes in order to afford housing.

And we're talking basic 2 bedroom apartment – not a place in Vail or Aspen.

The challenges faced by the senior homeless population is forcing the agencies that work with this population, and our governments, to reevaluate the services they need – it is no longer simply a meal, a roof, and rehabilitation.

In the words of Anne Miskey,  
executive director of the Downtown Women's Center in LA:

“We are dealing with the same issues with a 50-year-old that a housed person would have in their 70s, in terms of physical and mental health. It is extremely difficult. And women are affected more than men.”

Likewise, Alice Callaghan,  
an Episcopal priest,  
who has spent 35 years working with the homeless in LA, states:

“Baby boomers have health and vulnerability issues that are hard to tend to while living in the streets.”

So what does this mean for us here and now?

How are we being called to hear and respond to today's lessons?

Well, despite the temptation which I know we all feel,  
I don't believe we are being asked to run home,  
lock our doors, and crawl into bed,  
as appealing as that may seem.

Both Elijah and Jesus  
surely felt the weight of the enormity  
of the condition of the poor,  
the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows  
just as we do today  
and those in the generations between have.

But I believe the answer lies in today's readings.

Both Elijah and Jesus,  
despite their fear and doubt,  
believed in God's true nature.

They believed and lived into their faith  
in God's love for all creation.

Elijah and Jesus  
responded to the crisis of their day  
by revealing to the world God's true self.

They revealed to a broken and hurting world  
the God who heals,  
the God who feeds,  
the God who loves beyond all measure.

And they were the personification of this revelation of God.

They didn't simply tell people  
*they* believed that God would heal, feed and love.

They *themselves* healed,  
fed and loved those who were in desperate need,  
the poor, the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows.

Despite the exceedingly desperate situations  
that both Elijah and Jesus found themselves in,  
it is crucial to realize that  
they were able to act as God's hands, feet, and heart  
on earth in their time and place.

I believe that God calls us to the same response.

I believe that God calls each and every one of us  
to actively work for ways in which we can resist  
and counter those forces that impede life.

I believe that what both Elijah and Jesus have shown us  
is how to embody the work of God.

They have clearly shown us  
how to be the hands, feet and heart of God,  
here and now.

We might be well served to take note of Paul's letter to the Galatians:

But when God,  
who had set me apart before I was born  
and called me through his grace,  
was pleased to reveal his Son to me,  
so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.

Paul became the personification of Christ's  
hands, feet and heart  
to those in his time who did not know  
the love of God.

This is our call, my friends.

We have a vision of what we are  
called to given to us through  
Jesus the Christ.

I wonder,  
are we able to put aside all that holds us back,  
fear, grief, temerity,  
a lack of faith in our abilities?

I wonder,  
are we able to stand strong in our understanding  
that we do everything with the help of God?

I wonder,  
are we willing to be the hands, feet and heart of God,  
here and now?