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1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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Like so many people, I've been watching oil spew into the Gulf of Mexico with horror, really. From the satellite images that show the spill and its sheen spreading through the Gulf, to the close-up pictures of crabs with brown puddles pooling around their shells . . . it is *so awful*. Even this week, with the first step supposedly made to halt the leak, I have felt such despair and helplessness. Between 20 and 50 *million* gallons of oil have spilled so far – filling the sea, coating the marshes, staining white beaches black. Like a fountain on the ocean floor, the oil has billowed up and out – out of control.

This week it reminded me of a story I used to read to my children: “The Magic Cooking Pot.” A little girl, Jenny, and her mother lived alone. They were hungry, because they had no money to buy food. One day while Jenny was looking for berries in the forest, a kindly old woman who'd been watching her and her mom – who knew what troubles they had – gave Jenny a gift: a little black cooking pot. She told Jenny the pot would make soup when she asked it to, and she taught Jenny how. Sure enough, it made a different kind of soup every day; Jenny and her mother ate well. Then one day, Jenny was out for a walk and her mom got hungry. “Boil, little pot,” she said, and the pot began to produce some wonderful vegetable soup. But her mother had not been paying close attention to Jenny as she'd made all those meals, and her mom didn't know how to *stop* the pot once she'd eaten enough. The pot boiled on and on, out of control, and the soup spilled over – covering the floor of their house, flowing out the front door, rushing downhill, flooding the village. Folks panicked, not knowing how to make the pot stop boiling. They begged it, screamed at it, tried hard to clamp down its top. Finally Jenny returned and spoke the magic words, simply: “Stop, little pot!” It took the villagers ages to clean their houses, but apart from that, things turned out all right. Jenny took charge of the pot, and from then on, it behaved like it was supposed to. Like the jar of meal in the widow's house – in the story from First Kings. Like the jug of oil that widow had . . . the pot produced just enough food to feed them, and it did not run out.

There are days I want some magic words. Words to stop the bad stuff from happening – to stem the disaster, end the panic. Words to do some good – to fill hungry bellies and meet a concrete need. There are plenty of days I could use just a few magic words But since I don't believe in magic pots and magic words, what I'm really saying I want is for *God* to *step in here* and work a little *divine* magic – like God did for Elijah and in Jesus. There are plenty of days I would like God to show up and fix some things. Heal the sick. Repair what's broken. Provide some help. What if we didn't *need* a Food Bank, or an offering for students in Pakistan, or complex repairs on the ocean floor? What if we could simply ask God to make the food, end the wars, fix the economies, clean up the messes we've made? There are days that sounds pretty good to me.

It sounded good to King Ahab, too. Why turn to a god like Baal, when Ahab *had* a god like Yahweh? *I think* at least part of the attraction was that Baal promised concrete help. He was the god of fertility and storms. He promised rain when it was needed and crops at the harvest time. Just say the magic words, right? Over an ox, on an altar . . . then get your help. It sounds like a pretty good deal.

The promises our God makes are not so clear, and God's power is not so easily produced. *Elijah knew that* when he went to King Ahab with the message about a drought. Even as the ravens brought Elijah food in the desert, even as that jar re-filled itself in the widow's house, even later, in Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal (when their magic words accomplished nothing, but God's fire came down to on cue) – *even then*, Elijah knew he bore witness a God who was powerful, but restrained . . . and not beholden to anyone. Elijah knew: his God was involved in human life, but separate from it, and unlikely to show up in a predictable way.

Strangely, we see this even in God's choice to become involved with Elijah. Surely God could have made God's point more clearly or directly Could have written a message in the stars, for instance. Could have loosed a genie from a bottle. Instead, God chose to speak and work *through a human being* – a pretty typical one, at that. Like most of us, Elijah is an interesting mix of faith and fear, doubt and trust. One minute he goes toe to toe with the prophets of Baal, confident of God's power. The next moment he runs away, scared of the consequences and afraid God won't protect him. Elijah is bold to speak God's judgment against the king and queen, but concerned about whether God will stick with him after that. Elijah speaks for God, but has no clear line of communication with God. He experiences God as most of us do – often silent, seemingly absent . . . involved, but separate. *So God's power comes to the world* – through limited human vessels, and in no predictable way.

There is, I'd say, a gut-wrenching quality to life with a God who stays hidden. Elijah cries out more than once – feeling in his bones how *hard* it is. Like when he carries the widow's son upstairs to pray; only in private can the prophet speak his heart. Is the woman right that God has killed her son in response to something Elijah has done? The prophet doesn't know, and it *hurts* him! He wonders *why* God fed the woman and her son, if only to let them die. Why had God helped that family, if only to abandon them? As Elijah prays he accuses God, questions God, pleads with God – much like we do as we watch a loved one suffering, an oil spill spreading, an economy struggling, a war raging. There is no magic formula to *make God help* . . . and we do not know God's intentions. It is hard for us.

But (perhaps this is a comfort) it appears that much of this is hard for God, too. In today's gospel reading, Jesus looks upon the widow whose son has died with *compassion*. The Greek word for "compassion" comes from a noun that relates to the entrails of the body – the "guts." So it is *gut-wrenching* for Jesus to look upon the widow's pain. And I think it must be awful for God to see us now – to share our grief over a world at war, an ocean polluted, poor people hungry God has bound God's self to humanity with all kinds of promises to *be our God* through thick and thin.

Through everything God has promised to stay committed to *people* who are broken and short-sighted and selfish in all kinds of ways. I bet there are plenty of days God would like a magic formula, too – one to make us wise and good and obedient. I bet there are lots of days God would just as soon *step in to fix things* herself.

But, that isn't how God works with us. God has made humans free, outside of his control . . . much like God is free, outside of human control. Perhaps there *is* a magic formula (to make us wise and obedient and good), but God decides not to use it. God preserves for us the choice – to pray to God, or not. To act responsibly, or not. To live with confidence or fear, generosity or greed And, even beyond our *choices*, God is patient with human weakness. God employs people who mean well, but make mistakes . . . people who act courageously, then get cold feet. That we are foolish and clumsy does not stop God from working in us, as God worked in Elijah.

Our Lord is powerful, for sure. These stories provide glimpses of God's ultimate power, in which we hope. *But*, as even the Bible's testimony shows, God rarely steps in to exercise power in direct and miraculous ways. More often than not, God's power is manifest in people like Elijah – folks like you and me – and in our efforts to do what we can with the people and things around us. As we are moved with compassion. As we reach out to each other in kindness and boldness, in hospitality and care. As we work to clean up the messes we've made. As we pray – sometimes accusing, sometimes pleading, sometimes confident – at peace. As we listen to God and God listens to us, we glimpse God's power . . . we feel its edges, at least.

We can't always make the bad stuff stop, but with God's help we can stem its flow. We can always make the good things materialize, but with God's help we can meet some concrete needs. We have a reason not to panic, anyway – even when things get out of control. We have a reason to hope. God may be hidden, but God's power is real. Real in us. Real *for* us. For now, that's the best deal I know.