

1 Kings 17:8-16  
June 6, 2010

South Plains  
Groundbreaking

### Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath

The presence of food has a leveling effect. Everybody eats. Everybody needs food. Even more than alcoholic beverages, food creates sociability and cements relationships. The food on this communion table is more than a bare symbol of communion with Christ; it's an occasion for coming to the Lord's Table, for accepting God's invitation to receive grace, and for acknowledging all the gifts given to us. So this sacrament is particularly appropriate on the day we break ground for Kirk Hall.

A lot of work has gotten us to this day. More than the work itself, however, this day is the result of joint efforts. Members of South Plains worked together. We worked with the community and more governmental agencies than I knew existed. We've worked with the Presbytery and our PCUSA General Assembly. We've worked and prayed with brothers and sisters in other churches, and they celebrate with us today. This effort is more than one congregation's work. It is God reaching out beyond this congregation to work through many hands.

The God of the scriptures repeatedly reaches beyond the chosen people in order to expand the boundaries of God's kingdom. That's the direction

Elijah's prophetic ministry is moving in the Old Testament reading for today. He starts out in Israel, announcing to King Ahab that a drought is coming. For a while, the prophet camps by a stream where he has water to drink. When the stream dries up, the Lord sends him out of Israel to the neighboring country of Sidon. In Sidon, in the town of Zarephath, the Lord says Elijah will find a widow who will feed him. That's a trek of 80 miles through drought-ridden country, but Elijah goes.

Sure enough at the gate of the town, he sees a widow gathering sticks to make a fire. Elijah, thirsty from walking, asks for water. There's something about a prophet that commands attention. The woman turns to draw water for this stranger, but then Elijah calls out, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." She has no bread. As a matter of fact, her larder is empty except for a handful of meal and a little oil. Elijah has arrived just as she is about to make a fire in order to bake her last loaf of bread. She plans to share that bread with her son as their last supper. No rain means they have no more grain to grind and make into bread. No bread means starvation. The food banks in Sidon are as empty as the food banks in Israel. Bravely, this widow and her son have resigned themselves to starve. Why should they share anything, much less their last loaf of bread, with this strange prophet?

Elijah's argument and his God's promise is that if she shares bread with the prophet of the Lord God of Israel, God will see to it that the handful of meal and the

little bit of oil will not run out until the drought is over. The widow listens and does as she is told and, indeed, “The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah (1 Kings 17:16).”

South Plains is not a poor congregation. But neither do we have a large number of members. And, we have had a capital campaign during an economic drought as severe as most of us have ever seen. But, our jar of meal has not been empty and our jug of oil has not failed. I believe that’s because the Lord has blessed the building of Kirk Hall. God has something in mind for us.

God’s plans are more comforting than convenient bathrooms, and more expansive than a large fellowship hall. God has already moved this church beyond the boundaries of Keswick. In 1819, South Plains was located on the East Belmont estate of Rogers Thornton. For fifty years we were like the “house church” for that plantation. Gradually, inevitably, we became a church for Keswick, then for this corner of Albemarle County, and now for a number of communities in the area. Just as the church of the New Testament expanded into the world of the Roman Empire, the church today is expanding into our world. Kirk Hall is our part of broadening and deepening the kingdom of God in Albemarle, Fluvanna, Louisa and Charlottesville.

When Jesus preached his first sermon in Nazareth, his hometown, he recalled this story of Elijah

and the widow of Zarephath. He pointed out that there were plenty of widows in Israel at the time, but the Lord sent Elijah to Sidon, to a foreigner. Together, the prophet and a starving widow, both outsiders in their own way, provided a sign of the Lord’s power over life and death.

The only hint of the widow’s faith comes at the very end of the chapter, after yet another miracle. Elijah revives the widow’s son when he appears to be dead. Her response is classic: “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth (17:24).”

Some of you know better than I how many times South Plains has come close to seeing its life as a church snuffed out, starved for lack of members, lack of money, lack of opportunity. But, to use an old phrase, the perseverance of the saints demonstrated again and again the power of God to bring life out of death. Today is a high point in our pilgrimage. Other challenges will come, I’m sure. Nevertheless, God is faithful.

Our part is to work together, to share meals, baptisms, and professions of faith; and to share them especially with outsiders. We worship the Lord of life, whose kingdom knows no boundaries, whose promise is life everlasting.