

So when I was in first grade, my teacher read us little seven year olds a book, called the Giving tree. Have you all heard of this book or read it? There's this female tree, and a little boy, and they love each other in the mother son sort of way, and it's sweet. He swings in the tree's branches, ate apples, carved his initials in it.

And then he grows up and leaves her and only comes back because he just wants stuff from the tree so he can have a good life: apples to sell, branches to build a house, trunk to build a boat, and then he abandons her for the rest of the time. Then, when he's old and decrepit, he finally comes back sits on her. And this line goes on over and over again: "and the tree was happy." Do you remember that line, over and over?

Because supposedly the moral to this story is the beauty of selfless, sacrificial love.

But I call shenanigans: the real moral to the story is: Kids are ungrateful jerks and giving to them is 100% thankless, but you should be happy anyway.

Sorry to those of you who love that book, but let's be honest: that kid was awful, and this book could maybe be used as an all-natural alternative form of birth control.

Because it paints giving as something that will demand everything of yourself and the best case scenario is you'll be at the end, all alone, and then your kid will return to you, walk over slowly, tears in his eyes... and then sit on you.

This story confirms all our concerns, fears, and distaste for giving. We can give, sacrificially, lovingly, patiently, and all the thanks we'll get for it is... you get sat on.

So I'm Emma, and I'm one of the pastors here at Harbor, and right now we're in the second week of our series we're calling The Whisper and the Fire: God Revealed in the story of Elijah. We're looking at the story of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament, and looking at the ways that God revealed who he is and what he does. Sometimes he reveals himself in big ways; other times, it's smaller and quieter.

We're in the Old Testament in a book called 1 Kings, chapter 17. This book is about the Kings of Israel and spoiler alert: things get really hairy at times. Right now, Elijah, God's prophet, is on the run from King Ahab. When a king doesn't listen to the words of God's prophet, that's not good – when they want to shoot the messenger instead of repent of their sins, that means they're not a good king, not a godly king.

So as Mike mentioned last week, King Ahab married Jezebel, and began worshipping other gods besides the Lord. It's not that he wasn't worshipping God – he thought he could add God in with all the other gods.

Anyhow, God sent his prophet Elijah to set Ahab straight, and Ahab didn't take the message well, so Elijah had to run for his life. That's where we pick up. Let's read in 1 Kings chapter 17 starting in verse 8:

8 Then the Lord said to Elijah, 9 "Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you." 10 So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, "Would you please bring me a little water in a cup?" 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her, "Bring me a bite of bread, too." 12 But she said, "I swear by the Lord your God that I don't have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die."

This is pretty grim! So God is not letting it rain on Israel because God is punishing Ahab for his marriage to Jezebel and his idolatry. And now we're seeing how it's hurting the most vulnerable people: this widow and her son are getting ready to eat the last of their food and die.

It's kind of weird that God sent Elijah to her, right? She isn't an Israelite: Zarephath is in Sidon, north of Israel. So she doesn't worship the God of Israel we can assume. But because she's not in Israel, that's a good place for Elijah to go, since he's on the outs with the King there. But it's still kind of weird: It would be like sending someone from America to a single mom who's out of work in the slums of Mexico – they don't have much to give! This widow has some flour and oil, and that's it. What can you even make with that? Some flat bread, I guess? Either way, a pretty small meal. Really grim.

But what happens? Let's pick up in verse 13: *13 But Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you've said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what's left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son."*

Man, this is pretty crazy. So not only is he asking a starving woman with a mouth to feed to give him food, but to feed him FIRST! Talk about a big ask.

Okay, onto verse 14: This is Elijah still speaking: *14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the Lord sends rain and the crops grow again!"*

Another very big ask here. Elijah is asking this woman to believe him, a foreigner, a stranger on the run, and he's also asking her to believe in the Lord, the God of a nation, of a people group, that she's not a part of. This is a big leap he's asking her to make. But she doesn't have much choice, right? She's in a desperate place:

15 So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her family continued to eat for many days. 16 There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the Lord had promised through Elijah.

That's pretty amazing! God provides for her, Elijah, and her son. It's a miracle. God took that tiny amount and multiplied it beyond what anyone thought was possible. This was supposed to only be enough food for two people, and it ended up sustaining them, keeping them alive. They were alive, they were fed, directly because of God's intervention. God made a promise to her and he followed through.

It's really incredible: God asked a lot of this woman. Sure, she was at the end of her rope, doesn't have much to give, but God asks her to give it anyway. And she does: she takes God at his word and trusts that she and her son will be okay as long as they do what God says.

And because she is faithful and she trusts God's word as it's spoken through Elijah, that's what happens!

So the moral of the story is: Even when it's really hard to give, give anyway and God will multiply the stuff you have. The end. (A way better story than the Giving Tree!)

...Not so fast.

The story about the widow and her son doesn't end there. Like most things in life, things aren't so simple as that. Let's keep going:

In verse 17 we read: 17 Some time later the woman's son became sick. He grew worse and worse, and finally he died. 18 Then she said to Elijah, "O man of God, what have you done to me? Have you come here to point out my sins and kill my son?"

Wow. Not what we were expecting, right? We thought we got our happy ending.

And this woman's response is worth looking at: O Man of God: what have you done to me?" She's blaming Elijah for what happened to her. And this is catastrophic: her son was the last person she had in her life, and he was taken from her. Losing a child is devastating anyway, but for her, this son was her entire family, her security when they got older.

But still, this is a strange lashing out. It's not like Elijah is the one who got her son sick, right? In fact, Elijah, through God's power, actually prevented them all from starving to death. So it's kind of weird that she's now turning around and saying this.

Or is it?

Remember, this woman is not someone who knows the God of Israel. What is she familiar with? Gods made in the image of man. And what do those gods act like? Like people. They are capricious. Petty. They act one way one day, and another way another day. They might do something benevolent and nice one day, and then do something cruel and strange the next. If they were like the god Baal, they may even demand blood spilled, the blood of innocent children, to keep them happy. These other gods and goddesses were all about themselves: they acted like people because they were made up by people, carved by people's hands. And people are often like that: they're vindictive. They change their minds. They show favor one day, and then they punish the next.

So she thinks that the God of Israel is doing this, that he killed her son to point out her sins. She thinks that like Baal, maybe the Lord wants the blood of innocents to keep him happy. She says that in verse 18: "Have you come here to point out my sins and kill my son?"

She thinks the God of Israel is kind of like the boy from the Giving Tree: Shows up when he needs something, and then leaves, taking everything with him. And she's left with less.

And we can understand this. Because that's why we are reluctant about giving right? Sacrificial giving makes us a little nervous. We give, and we give, and we give, and suddenly, we find that we're left alone and fully exposed with nothing left of ourselves. This woman, without her son, without anything. She thinks that the end game was punishment – that Elijah only came there, that God sent him as a curse, as someone who was going to take, take, take, until all that was left was her and her punishment.

She thinks God is a TAKER.

Someone who comes in, demands a lot, and then leaves.

She thinks God is someone who says: "Give me! Give me! Give me your money! Give me your food! Give me your pleasures! Give me your personality! Give me your livelihood! Give me your home! Give me your life! Give me! Give me!"

And she did give. She gave! She didn't know who this God of Israel was, but she trusted the word of this man, this stranger, this foreigner, the prophet of the Lord of Israel, and she fed him. She gave him the last morsels of food she was going to split between herself and her son because he told her to not be afraid. And so she gave!

She gave, and it looked like things were okay. But as it turned out, after she gave, God took her son. Her giving wasn't enough. God punished her, and she was left behind with nothing.

She once had a whole life: a home. Food. Family. And now she's alone, and her life is in shambles.

And then, it looks like God turned around, condemned her for being a sinner, and then killed her son.

She thinks God is cruel.

She thinks God is selfish.

She thinks God takes and takes and takes.

And it's all because Elijah showed up on her doorstep. She took him in, she trusted him and his word, and now her son's gone.

This God is judgmental. This God uses people. This God asked her to give, and this God was a taker.

Or, she thinks, maybe this man wasn't really God's prophet. Maybe this guy is a fraud – because if he was a true prophet, then this wouldn't have happened.

We can't really blame her for feeling hopeless, right? When someone dies, that's it. It's over. Nothing else can be done.

We feel this hopelessness ourselves sometimes, when a senseless death happens. It looks like this was a little boy, someone who wasn't meant to get sick and die. This widow had to bury her husband, and now she also has to bury her son? It's too much to bear.

Even Elijah seems a bit rattled by what happened here. After the widow accuses him of bringing misery into her life, he says to her in verse 19: *"Give me your son."* And he took the child's body from her arms, carried him up the stairs to the room where he was staying, and laid the body on his bed. 20 Then Elijah cried out to the Lord, *"O Lord my God, why have you brought tragedy to this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die?"*

This doesn't make sense to Elijah here, either. He knows God is in control. He knows God brought him to this widow's house. Why did he let this happen? Why did he do this? And this is ELIJAH! This guy who's saying this to God, questioning God, this is God's prophet! This is someone who is the mouthpiece of God, who knows that sometimes God has messages that people don't want to hear, but even he is questioning this, asking God: "Why? Why did you do this to this poor woman, this woman who gave so much? Why did you take her son?"

Why, God? Why did you do this??

No answer.

This is a prophet. The kind of person who has a direct line with God. So why isn't God answering? Where is he? God talks directly to him, we've seen that in scripture, but now there's silence.

So Elijah keeps praying: verse 21 *And he stretched himself out over the child three times and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, please let this child's life return to him." Three times he did this. "O Lord please let this child's life return to him." "O Lord my God, please let this child's life return to him."*

And then, that third time, something happens. Something more amazing than the multiplication of food: *"22 The Lord heard Elijah's prayer, and the life of the child returned, and he revived!"*

This boy was brought back to life. From death to life. The Lord heard Elijah's prayer. He listened to Elijah.

The Lord gave something back. He gave. The Lord gave something only HE can give: He gave the boy Life.

Let's continue our reading: *23 Then Elijah brought him down from the upper room and gave him to his mother. "Look!" he said. "Your son is alive!" 24 Then the woman told Elijah, "Now I know for sure that you are a man of God, and that the Lord truly speaks through you."*

The widow also goes through a transformation. She thought Elijah was bringing death into her home. She thought God was punishing her for her sins, even though she did as he asked. She doubted Elijah, she doubted whether God was really with this prophet after all. But now, with her son in her arms, she can see that Elijah is truly a prophet and the Lord really does speak through him.

Her faith is restored. She believes in God, and she trusts in His goodness. She trusts in the word of the man the Lord has sent to her. She trusts in the God of Israel.

This story has a happy ending. It's not like the Giving Tree.

I like stories with happy endings. I want happy endings. I think we all do.

But sometimes it's hard to see that happy ending. Sometimes it's hard to trust. Sometimes, life leaves us feeling like tree stumps. Like we gave everything, like we did what we thought was right. That we took a huge leap of faith. And instead of God's favor, we were given a curse.

If we're honest, sometimes we think God is like the little boy in the Giving Tree story: that he asks us to give him everything, our best, our resources, everything we have, we give him our lives, and in return, we become tree stumps, shadows of our former selves.

Maybe we hear the voice of God through his word, or through people who are following God or praying for us, and it's uncomfortable. This voice is asking us to do something we're unsure about, something we don't want to do.

And we're worried if we give of ourselves, God's going to take, and then desert us.

This is kind of scary stuff. Jesus wants us to : (Matthew 16:24) *"take up your cross, and follow me. 25 If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it."*

And if it's a good day, we might read that or hear that verse and think: "Sure, I can do that."

But what if that meant you had to change your life? Like, really change your life? What if it meant to give up our lives we had to... give up our lives...?

On a good day, it's easy to make these promises. You know, it's easy on your wedding day to be like: "oh yeah, I'll lay down my life for my spouse, of course! I'll give everything to my dearest darling lovey dovey!" And then, ten years later, on a bad day, when your spouse wants you to pass up on a promotion so that your work week doesn't cut into family time, you think: "But this is my LIFE, my CAREER! If he/she really loved me, he/she wouldn't make me choose him/her over this!"

Because when we give, we give up a piece of ourselves. And we don't like that.

What if giving our lives to Jesus means you have to give of your finances, of your resources, even though you don't have much to give. Maybe money's tight. Maybe you're poor, you're vulnerable, you don't know how you're going to make ends meet. Maybe you just like your life how it is – You finally got that house, that car, fill in the blank, and you don't want to let go of those things, the money, the comfort, the career, the identity you've carved out for yourself.

When we don't want to give up our lives, ourselves to God, we can start to see God as a taker.

And worse, we think he's a taker like the boy in that book: he's going to come over and say: "I want this part of you: your money. Your talents. Your relationships. Your home. Your time. Your LIFE." And if we give to Him, we'll be left like shadows of our former selves.

And why are we so reluctant to give these things to God? It's because the truth is we DEFINE ourselves by those things. By the things we have. That widow defined herself as a mother; her son was her security.

We find security in these kinds of things:

We find our sense of self in them: I'm a mom, a dad, a friend, a daughter, a son,

In careers: I'm a co-worker, a CEO, a teacher, a student, a hippie, a musician, an engineer.

Or things we own: I drive a Mercedes, I own a five bedroom, a vacation home, I have a huge TV, I have season tickets for the Red Sox. Not bad things, but things all the same.

These are all things. They make us feel better about ourselves. Because we like security. We like having food. Secure finances. Steady finances. Clear plans for the future. Comfort. A sense of ourselves.

And when we DO hit hard times, we don't want God to ask anything of us. When things aren't going so hot, we're like: God, I'm taking a breather here, and you want me to do WHAT???

I don't have a job right now, and you want me to give of my finances? I'm supposed to give when I don't have anything left to give?

I don't have a nice home, a secure place to live, it's embarrassing how tight it is in my living room, and you want me to show hospitality to others?

I work full time, I have three kids, a mortgage, bills, a long commute, I have absolutely NO TIME for anyone, but you want me to help set up flags at Harbor on Sunday mornings?

We say: I don't have money to give! I don't have space to give! I don't have time to give! Believe, I'm in the same boat!

We feel like that widow. The chips are down, and we're being asked to give when we don't have much to give. And we're worried we're going to wind up like that Giving Tree: a dry old stump, no thanks, just an old man sitting on us!

And unlike that crazy tree, after we give and give and give and go from being a beautiful tree to being a stump for some old guy to sit on, we WILL NOT BE HAPPY!

We're afraid that if we give of ourselves: our careers, our time, our resources, our love, our hospitality, we do the right thing, we're afraid terrible things will happen. We could lose our health. We could have something happen, like get in a car accident in that Mercedes. We might be afraid of losing a friendship. We're afraid of losing a family member. What if our company shuts down? What if an old struggle reemerges again and we become discouraged and depressed? It's not a matter of "if". If there's anything certain in life, it's that there are good times... and hard times. We all have them. And those bad times can really derail us.

And during the bad times, we start to wonder: Is the Lord really good? Does he really care about me? Are these people at church serious, and can we trust them when they say Jesus is God, and he will change my life? When life is bad, am I being punished for being a terrible person? Am I still being punished for my mistakes?

We start to kind of feel like that widow: We feel condemned, downtrodden, and lied to. We think the church folks lied to us. Or maybe God lied to us.

That's perfectly natural. Perfectly human. But that doesn't make it true. Something that we need to be able to do is separate out the truth (point to one side, right side) from what we might be feeling in that moment (left side).

We can't allow these things that happen to color our view of God. Our circumstances change, but God doesn't: he isn't a fickle God who changes how he feels on a whim. He isn't like Baal, or the other ancient, vengeful gods. He doesn't decide to show favor to us one day and then curse us the next because he thinks we're bad people. That's not the Lord's nature.

God's nature is revealed to us in this verse: In Exodus, when he was talking to Moses, He tells called himself: "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness." (Ex 34:6) God is a compassionate God. God is a merciful God. God is Not an angry God; He is slow to anger, he is patient with us. And God's love and faithfulness NEVER FAILS.

So in the hard times, God has compassion, mercy, and love for us. And he is faithful toward us.

It can feel like, in the midst of hard times, in the midst of impossible times, that God is asking too much of us, or is hurting us, punishing us for our sins. But there are a few things we need to remember:

- 1.) God does ask a lot of us: He asks for us lives so we can live more abundantly! Yes, to follow God means we have to lay down our lives to God, but it's not about God chopping us down to nothing. It's about laying down our arms, stripping off layer upon layer of baggage and garbage and allowing God to free us. He makes us new creations! Before Jesus, before his intervention in our lives, we're on the road to ruin. God isn't asking us to trust him with our lives so we're emptied out and destroyed: he's asking us to trust him with our lives so we can be preserved, so we can be made into something new and beautiful: children of God.
- 2.) And two: God listens. God hears Elijah's prayer. And it's an honest, from the heart prayer. "God, why did you take the life of this little boy?" And we can pray those same honest prayers: "God, why did I lose my job?" "God, why did you let my mom, dad, friend die?" "God, why did you close that door in my face? Why don't I have a spouse, a steady income, good health?" God listens, and he hears all of these prayers.
- 3.) And three: Even when there is no hope, even when there is no life, with God there is still hope for redemption. That's what our foundation is built on: it may not seem like

everything's okay, but we still hold onto hope. We still grasp it and trust in God's goodness and ability to make things new, if not now, if not in our lifetime, if not in the next hundred years, we trust and hope in Him. God asks us to give, but he gives more: he gives us redemption. Like Elijah raising the widow's son back to life, God takes our bad times and redeems them for His glory. He brings us back to Him, even in the worst circumstances. Even when there doesn't seem to be any hope left, God WILL step in, God will bring hope in where there was nothing but sadness and hopelessness.

But we have to let him. We have to give our lives over to Jesus first.

Here's the irony: if we cling onto the things we want, the things of this life, the opposite of security is going to happen. Jesus tells us in Matthew 16:25 *"If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it."* The harder you cling to your possessions, your job, your friendships, your goals, your identity in this life, the more your life will fall apart because this life by itself isn't life. This life that we see that we experience here, without God, it's a SHADOW. It's broken. It's only a temporary taste of what true life is. If we try to hang onto it, we WILL LOSE IT, because it DOESN'T LAST.

To lay down our lives for Jesus, to say that we're dead to ourselves but alive in Him, that's when you go from black and white to color. Do you remember that from the wizard of Oz? When Dorothy goes from that drab, dusty, black and white Kansas life to the colorful, magical world of Munchkinland in Oz? That's what God is asking us to do. Yesterday, we had a baptism celebration, and it was so great, so beautiful, because baptism celebrates this transformation: When we immerse someone into the water, that is that moment of dying to self, of being buried, and when you lift that person up, that is that resurrected life! Alive, brought into life, through Jesus. Because new life in Jesus begins NOW. It's not pie in the sky when you die; when Jesus came here two thousand years ago as a little baby, that was the beginning of God's transforming this world.

But to follow Jesus is not a promise of the easy life. It doesn't mean all your problems will go away. It doesn't mean that all the bad things that ever happened to you disappear. But it DOES mean that redemption IS HAPPENING.

That word redemption, it's one of my favorites. Because redemption is about hope: God can take the broken pieces of your life and put them back together into something beautiful. God can redeem anything through the power of His son.

But you have to hand over your life to Him. You have to give. You have to give your life to God. And that's a big step of faith.

This series we're in is about who God is. He reveals himself to us in His word, in this story of Elijah. The Lord is God, and He is worthy of our worship. When we think of God revealing himself, we think of big spectacles: fire from heaven. Earthquakes. Big gestures. Or we think of an old guy with a long white beard. But God is much deeper, much more layered, there's so much more to God than huge gestures, or guys with long beards. In this story, God tells us who he is through this story of the widow.

And who is God in this story? God is a GIVER. In this story, God gave the widow, her son, and Elijah food during famine. And even more importantly, he gave her son life. God gives. The Lord is a GIVER.

A lot of people know John 3:16 by heart. And it's a good verse; it describes this God we worship. It paints a picture of him. Let's read it together: 16 "For this is how God loved the world: He gave[a] his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

God loved the world so he gave his only son. It was because of love. Selfless love that he gave to us.

God gave so much to us, and all we have to give up is our black-and-white world for one in color. Sure, like the widow, God is asking us to give something. But what?

If we look at John 3:16, Jesus tells us that all we need to do is believe. God gives us his son, and all he asks of us is to give him our faith, our belief, to him. And he will redeem our lives. That's his promise to us. That's our happy ending.

Let's pray.