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The Christian Trusts God to Provide

The hardest times to trust in God are the times we need him most. It's easy to trust God when the sun is shining in life, but not so easy when dark clouds are filled with confusion and conflict. In this week's Gospel, Jesus provided a filling meal for an enormous crowd with nothing more than the fixings in a picnic basket. He reminded his followers then and now that **Christians are defined** as people who trust God to provide.

Sermon 1 Kings 17:1-6

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there." So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

Introduction: If we Lutherans could identify the one thing that bothers us the most, I wonder what it would be. Somebody might say guilt—we struggle with a sin we can't shake or with guilt because of some sin long ago. I suppose some might say fear; we're just worry warts and we can't get rid of the fear that the sky is falling down. I've never taken a poll or done a survey, but I wonder if Lutherans worry about "lack" more than anything else—the lack of what we want or the lack of what we need or the lack of what we feel we have coming.

We all know, of course, that any feeling about what we lack is pretty silly. We don't lack much. We're not homeless, we're not starving, we have families, and we're healthy enough to be in church this morning. But there are times when that feeling of lack doesn't seem so silly. Everything is good, but I just lack a friend I can talk to. I have plenty of money in the bank; what I lack is good health to be able to enjoy it. I'm doing fine, I guess, but what I lack is a career that fulfills me. Crops look fine but what we really lack is rain. Sometimes the lack is more acute, more severe: the loss of a spouse, the diagnosis of cancer, a serious accident, a house damaged in a tornado. Christians usually put on a brave face and say, "Well, God will provide," but the hurt and the pain don't go away--and sometimes God doesn't provide or at least he doesn't seem to provide.

We can't count how many times we've prayed, "Give us this day our daily bread" and we say we believe that he does give us our daily bread. But sometimes we wonder. We've been defining the typical Christian these past weeks and the theme for today is *The Christian Trusts God to Provide*. Well, sometimes we do and sometimes we're not so sure. So it's good for us to look back at an episode in the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah—we heard about him in the First Reading—and remember how God works to take care of what we lack, how he actually gives us our daily bread. Here's the point:

The Lord Will Provide

Often with unlikely methods...Always with unfailing mercy

We don't know too much about Elijah's background. The Bible historians call him **Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead**, but nobody knows where Tishbe was. He arrived on the scene out of nowhere during the reign of King Ahab—you all remember Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab was one of a long line of kings up in Israel who promoted the worship of the idol Baal and the Lord had been really teed off at Israel for long time. The time came to get serious. Elijah appeared before Ahab and announced, **As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.** The drought lasted for three years—not a drop of rain, not enough moisture in the air even to form dew. Everybody suffered.

Elijah suffered, too; he was hungry and he was thirsty. He didn't have royal stockpiles to fall back on or ships to import water and food. Ahab certainly wasn't going to help; he was out to kill Elijah, not feed him. So the Lord provided. **Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there." So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.** The hiding place makes sense; it was cut off from the rest of Israel in a place where Ahab wouldn't look and there was plenty of water. But the ravens don't make sense. Ravens don't even feed their own young. Ravens don't eat bread. Jesus said ravens **do not sow or reap and they have no storeroom or barn.** Ravens are scavengers; they prey on dead animals—roadkill. If they stumble across meat good enough for a human to eat, they devour it themselves. No one would have guessed—no one would have dreamed—that God would provide for Elijah with food from ravens!

The First Reading for today ends there but the story goes on. Eventually, the brook dried up and the Lord sent Elijah to the town of Zarephath—another place where Ahab wouldn't look for him. Instead of ravens, the Lord used a widow to provide food. You got it; a widow: no income, no insurance, no food stamps. She had enough flour and oil to make one last loaf of bread and then starve with her son. I think you know this story: the oil and the flour never ran out! No one would have guessed—no one would have dreamed—that God would provide for Elijah with oil and flour that never ran out! Now think of today's Gospel. No one would have guessed—and no one would have dreamed—that Jesus would feed 5,000 men and who knows how many women and children with five loaves of bread and two small fish!

So how do we get our food? We buy it or grow it or import it. How do we get our homes? We build them or rent them or buy them. How do we get a family? We find a spouse and have some kids. It's all very natural and so normal. It's the way God works to provide for us. Jesus said, **God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** But God doesn't depend on what's natural; he's not bound by what's normal. There are times when the Lord pushes the envelope, times when he kicks it up a notch, times when he proves he can provide exactly how he wants to. He can do it through ravens, widows, and the contents of a picnic basket. He can provide through unexpected legacies, miracle cures, and accidents we avoid by an inch. The psalm writer sang, **Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.** The truth is that the Lord provides and **often** he provides in very **unlikely** and unexpected ways. Why does he do that? He does it because he can!

Often...why not always? Jezebel killed all kinds of God's prophets, but she didn't kill Elijah. Hundreds of widows starved in Israel during that drought, but not the widow in Zarephath. Thousands of people listened to Jesus preach, but he didn't feed all of them. Some Christians never get rich, some Christians don't get cured, and some Christians get killed in accidents. How does that work?

Everything God does in our lives, everything he provides, gets filtered through his love and wisdom. Parents provide for their children in the same way. The Christmas presents seem meager, but there's a surprise trip to Disney World in spring. The allowance seems low, but it teaches a lesson about thrift. The use of the car is denied because of the danger of inexperience. Wise parents provide for their children with love. A God, who is wiser than parents, provides for us in mercy. Whatever God provides for us is perfect for the plans he has for us.

The Lord had a plan for Elijah. God appointed Elijah to take on one of the most powerful kings in the ancient world along with his blood-thirsty wife and announce the reality of God's punishment. Elijah was to challenge 450 prophets of Baal to a fiery dual on Mt. Carmel and then order them all to be slaughtered. Elijah presided over the gruesome deaths of both Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah was to be the only man we know besides Jesus who went into heaven without death—he roared to heaven in a chariot of fire. He became the pattern that John the Baptist followed in announcing the good news of the coming Christ. And then Elijah stood with Moses on the mountain while Jesus was transfigured and displayed his glory. God prepared Elijah for his extraordinary mission by providing for him with extraordinary miracles. God provided for Elijah in a way that fit into his plan for Elijah exactly—and that's exactly what God does for us! **He always provides for us with unfailing mercy.**

Long ago one of the church fathers wrote, "Christian, why do you think so little of yourself when God thinks so highly of you? Why dishonor yourself when God so honors you? For you the light dispels the darkness; for you the sun, moon, and stars shed their light; for you the earth bears flowers and trees and fruits; for you the air and earth and waters are all filled with marvelous life." There are more questions to ask. Christian, why do you wonder if God will provide for you when he provided his one and only Son? For you God's Son took on your human form that you might be reborn as the children of God. For you he endured the load of the law and the pain of the cross that you might be free from the chains of sin and death. For you he rose from his tomb and ascended to heaven that you might be sure you have a place there with him. For you he poured power into the Word and sacraments that your faith might be created and sustained. **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** Well, of course. **And that's why Christians trust God to provide.**