

<sup>8</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him, <sup>9</sup> "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you."<sup>10</sup> So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink."<sup>11</sup> And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."<sup>12</sup> And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die."<sup>13</sup> And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son."<sup>14</sup> For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" <sup>15</sup> And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

At a preaching conference I attended, we heard some songs, and explanations, by a contemporary Christian musician, Kyle Matthews. One of his songs tells story about a poor laboring man who worked hard to keep his family alive. Every day he carried his work ten miles, each way. Back and forth, he went, spending his body, in order to provide a modicum of support. He wasn't a bad man, but neither was he a saint, by any stretch of the imagination. He was pretty ordinary.

And every day, as he traveled the 10 miles each way, carrying his load – he would pass by a monastery. And he felt drawn to the place where the holy men followed their vocation. He wondered what it would be like to be holy like that. He wondered what it would mean to be so close to God.

One day, as he went by the monastery, one of the monks – a priest – was standing by the gate. And the worker came up to him, and said, "Please sir, I travel by your monastery each day. Pray, tell me, what is it that you do each day?"

And the old priest said, "**What do we do? We fall down. And we get back up. Fall down and rise up. Fall down and rise up.**"

And the poor working man went on his way – a little disappointed with the response that he got. But by the time he got home, he realized that he was really uplifted by what the old priest had told him: "**Fall down; rise up. Fall down, rise up.**" That's when he realized – the SAINTS ARE JUST SINNERS WHO FALL DOWN, AND THEN GET BACK UP.

I often use such a description to describe to people what we mostly do here at Saint Mark. **We fall down, we get up.**

And it's good to know that we are not really expected to be perfect people – on our own power. We depend upon God's power to recover from our failures. And we know that God loves us through our own failures.

Today's lesson from the First Testament takes falling to a wholly new place. This is serious stuff!

The widow of Zarephath to whom the prophet Elijah is sent, has fallen to a dangerous place. The description of her behavior and of her mind set tell of a woman who is on her last gasp. She is gathering sticks, in order to prepare one last little meal of bread alone, after which she and her son may die.

It's a story whose facts remind me much of Hagar, Sarah's slave, who was (in Genesis 21) banished with her son Ishmael into the wilderness. And she and the boy went there to die. But God provided a way out.

And here, too, God provided a way out for this extremely poor widow. At our worst, I doubt that there has been anyone here today who has ever been as low as this woman – with nothing but the sticks she can gather from the ground and a handful of flour and a little oil in a jug.

She had fallen during this time of national depression to a terrible level. Nothing is said about whether her poverty was her own fault, or the fault of others. But fault was irrelevant now. Now, she was ready to quit. Now she was ready to die. Period.

Yes, God provided a way out for this extremely poor widow. BUT – at what cost to her? She had to give up all that she had in order to share with this wandering prophet. Out of her next-to-nothingness, she had to voluntarily take care of him. She had to somehow TRUST that giving away her last would save her. She had to leap into the abyss of taking a course of action which everything in life up to that point told her was absolutely crazy.

And, such an action would indeed appear to be crazy. Trusting in God as this strange man demanded made no sense at all. But when she did it, God provided all that was needed for this strange man named Eliza, as well as herself and her son. And – as the story continues – this meager amount of food lasted for weeks.

In her falling, she had to trust. And, in doing so she was saved.

Most of us spend the first part of our lives trying to live by the rules, trying to make it in the world. We have little falls along the way. Sometimes we get bumps and bruises. Sometimes we get scarred. But we keep going, trying to live into the way that will bring satisfaction and maybe even a little prosperity.

But, eventually, as we enter a new stage of life, we WILL have a bigger fall.

This is not news that many of us want to hear. Actually (if you remember the study I talked about last week) you know that we all have a confirmation bias. We want to come to church and have the preacher tell us something to confirm what we already believe, what we expect him or her to say, and perhaps sprinkle in a song lyric, story or joke, and send us on our way.

But, I'm here to tell you today – that like the widow of Zarephath, you and I WILL experience a second half of life FALL that will bring us to our knees. None of us want it, but it must happen.

In the first half of our life, we build the container wall to enclose and contain a successful life. Then something will come along and make us fall – in order that we can discover the life that is meant to be lived, and not contained by that container.

We don't like to fall. But like love, the real meaning of life, must be fallen into. We fall in love. We fall into life's true meaning. God comes like a stinky old prophet, and will not make much progress with us, until we are forced to accept his helping hand, because we have fallen and we cannot get up.

Miguel de Unamano, in his book *The Tragic Sense of Life* [1912] was bold enough to say that we have distorted the meaning of faith by aligning it with the

western notion of progress. He notes that Jesus and the prophets understood that there is a certain tragic sense to life, in which we learn life's real meaning. It's not just about making things work nor about making us happy. It's about discovering the real meaning of life.

Another one of the prophets who passed along that word was Isaiah:

**God will be a holy place ... and will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. (Isaiah 8:14)**

And it is only when we stumble, when we fall, that we realize how **the true meaning of life, must ultimately be distinguished from the circumstance of life.** **Life's true meaning is a deeper river that runs beneath the circumstances.**

This true meaning of life:

- Involves TRUSTING GOD.
- It involves letting go of the old notions of success.
- It involves letting go of the old notions of self-sufficiency.
- It involves a radical dependence upon the PROVIDENCE OF GOD to take care of us.

We simply cannot get there with a self-improvement plan of our own. For that will only allow us to look at life through the same lens we have always used, with the same rules and expectations. We must fall down, and lose our power, in order to have our eyes opened.

Well! That certainly is not the good news we came to hear, preacher. If that's the message you have for us, I'd have rather stayed home.

And, if you have such a thought, you are simply confirming what I am trying to tell you. We will not get to this place on our own. We have to fall.

But in this second half of life falling ***...which by the way is not related to chronological year; there are some saints of the church who fell into the second half of life in their very early years. Mother Teresa comes to mind, As she***

*discovered this truth by falling as a very young adult, who lived out the second half of her life for a very long time....* in this second half of life, we discover a whole new way of seeing, and of living, in which we are not dependent upon the opinions and approval of other people. We enter into an entirely new relationship with God that gives life in ways that far exceed to badges of success we had previously tried to accumulate.

It is when we have fallen OUT OF THE DRIVER'S SEAT, that we discover the God who is disguised as our life.

In this new life, we discover the real meaning of what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:10: **It is when I am weak, God is able to make me strong.**

The bad news is that we are going to fall. The good news is that the falling enables us to let go, to let go of the self-sufficiency, to let go of the early life notions of success. When we fall, there is always the temptation to hold on to those former badges of success, to hope that God will somehow return us to what we used to view as what happiness meant.

But, if we can somehow let go, and somehow TRUST, then a whole new meaning to life comes – one that all our life is meant to discover.

We fall down; we get up. And sometimes we fall down so hard, that we can't get back up without God's help. Ouch that hurts! But, gosh, it allows us to be blessed beyond meaning.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.