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Bottom of the Barrel

1 Kings 17:11-17

The god Baal is a close friend of mine. I know he wasn't mentioned by name in our 1 Kings text but, even without his name, this text is all about Baal. He was the Canaanite god of storms and rain and fertility of the earth. Baal was the god everyone in Canaan loved the most. With his clouds of rain, he brought them victory over their dry desert land. With his power, the people flourished and their pocketbooks prospered. He even got the best land. Temples to Baal were built on the top of every mountain and hill the eye could see. He got the greatest view and the highest praise. He and I have been close during many times in my life for Baal loves a party. He is all about the celebrations and the time of plenty. When my grades were high and education was easy, it was easy enough to fall into relationship with him. When my health was good and my body was minding me; when my children were strong and my marriage was untested; when my work was fulfilling and my friends were plentiful, all of these were times when Baal and I could be close. He and I could rise to those high places where we had the best views and more abundance than we could imagine.

I am not alone in my friendship with Baal. The people of Israel had a relationship with him from the moment they entered the Promised Land. We know that many of them worshiped him throughout their time in Canaan and even into the time of the judges and kingdoms, all the way through the eras of Hosea and Jeremiah. It was easy to worship him and, even more than this, it was hard not to. Their neighbors worshiped him and things often seemed to go well for them. They lived in a desert where water meant everything: the difference between you living or dying and water was Baal's specialty. Why not rejoice with him in your abundance and, when times got hard, what could it hurt to beg from him some respite from your drought?

Recently I heard an interview on the radio. The journalist was talking with several people who had one thing in common: they had all been out of work for at least 16 months. They talked about whether or not they had saved up for this financial famine. They shared how it had affected their families. One was even frank enough to admit how little time he had left before they would be bankrupt. Then the interviewer asked what had been the most difficult part of the experience. One woman answered immediately. "I did not know how many friends I would lose," she said. "I have lost so many friends." And that's the real trouble with Baal, you see. The real trouble is that he is only a good friend in the good times. Have you ever trusted in someone or something like that?

When the prophet Elijah meets the widow in our story she has been worshiping Baal her entire life and, I'm certain, there were times when they were quite close. But now there is no rain. Nothing will grow and so there is no food. She has literally scraped the bottom of her barrel of meal and there are only two servings left, a last supper for her and her son. She knows that she will die from this drought and so will her child. Perhaps she is a widow because the famine has already taken her husband. And there is no point in praying to Baal for he is not available when hard times come. Everyone in Canaan knew that when the rain will not come it means Baal is dead. He cannot help. This beloved and popular god has no power when the worst happens. When Elijah asks the widow to scrape

out the last of what she has he is asking her to face the bottom of that barrel and see who awaits her there. It is not Baal who meets her there. It is Yahweh.

And this is the point, isn't it? The point and purpose of our faith? Here we learn again that Yahweh is the only true God and he is not true because he gets worshiped in all the best locations and he is not true because he has the power to control the weather. He is the only true God because he does not leave when the celebrations dry up. He is not careless with our lives, withholding nourishment willy-nilly as if we are worth nothing. He does not forget the weak and the worn out, the outsider or the outcast. And, when the worst happens, he still wields power and presence. Even Elijah is willing to grant that perhaps Baal has some power but power does not a true God make. Elijah knew there were powers in this world and we know it too. But Yahweh has the ultimate power because he is the only one who stays around when everyone and everything else has been lost. Our God is not afraid of the bottom of the barrel for even when it seems the hope in our own life is completely dried up God can sustain us through it. When our health fails us or our confidence or our relationships, God can lift us out of that so that we can live again. It is not always easy and it is never simple, this recovery from our droughts. Remember the widow did not receive a banquet but just enough food to keep her alive. Even so, it is enough. It is enough to know that God is there and enough to know that the drought does not win.

Here is the amazing thing about this. While Baal can be a good friend, he is the fair weather kind at best. But Yahweh, our one and only God, is not only a friend through good times and bad but Yahweh even seems to seek out us bottom-of-the-barrel kind of folk and use us to further his work in this world. We are not only *not* abandoned but we are sought after. Just before our passage God used ravens to feed Elijah. Ravens, which were only known as being scavengers that sustained themselves off of others' deaths under God's calling, became life-givers. A widow, who cannot even feed herself, under God's calling, could keep not only herself alive but also feed a visiting prophet. And even Elijah, an outsider with no pedigree or standing, under God's calling, becomes the most important prophet of them all. God can use any of us, even if we feel we are at the bottom of our barrel, perhaps even especially then.

What amazing courage this gives us. We do not have to fear any downturn or dry spell. We do not worry we will be left alone in our desert. We know, even if we reach the bottom, our God is there and, even there, God uses us for great work, far beyond our own abilities. Baal may have seemed like a friend in the good times but, like the woman who was unemployed whose friends were not really her friends, Baal was never really God. Even when we were lured by his passing prosperity and momentary provision, it was never really Baal who celebrated with us in those good times. It was Yahweh, our Lord.

Our Lord's friendship has easily outlasted Baal's—not only in the history books but in our own private histories too. For we lift our eyes to the hills. Where will our help come from? Will it come from those high places? Our help comes from the Lord. Amen.