

## **Doing What We Can, With What Little We've Got**

### **1 Kings 17:8-16 by Patty Friesen (Nov. 8/15)**

In our scripture this morning, the widow of Zarephath and her son are slowly starving to death during the three-year drought and famine in Israel. Elijah has the boldness to ask this widow for water and bread. She replies that she is preparing the last meal for she and her son but Elijah tells her to make it for him and her meal and oil will not run out until the rains come again. In great faith that Jesus upholds as an example to all of Israel later in his ministry, she makes that last cake and gives it to Elijah and in that beautiful verse 16, 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.

Doing what we can, in faith, with what little we've got, particularly as it relates to oil, crude not olive, was my take-away from the lectures on the oil industry and faith I attended at Canadian Mennonite University last month. I wasn't particularly interested in the topic. I was just looking for the church to pay for my train trip to Winnipeg to see my sister and mom. I had no idea that faith had anything to do with the oil patch until Alberta born Dr. Darren Dochuk told me it did. The discovery of oil in Pennsylvania at the turn of the century by John D. Rockefeller changed the American economy and American religious landscape. John D.'s wealth and his guiding principles of slow growth and philanthropy and ecumenism and human development shaped the early decades of his Standard Oil Company. It grew slowly and financed the arts and liberal Protestantism in the eastern US.

A young wildcat, J.H. Pew couldn't drill into the tightly controlled oil industry in Pennsylvania so he went west to east Texas and hit the largest oil reserve in the world –

an oil patch 43 miles long and 10 miles wide with billions of gallons of crude for extraction. J.H.'s guiding principles were individualism and exploration and right of capture. Whoever found the oil could take it and do with it whatever they liked. J.H.'s faith was more Pentecostal and he believed God guided him to his successful oil finds. He supported evangelical institutions in the US – Fuller Seminary, Billy Graham and the magazine Christianity today. He founded Sunoco oil company and supported other industrialists in their quests and financed poor Pentecostal congregations in east Texas that suddenly became rich overnight. Churches even had oil derricks on their property. Imagine if Osler Mennonite had a derrick in our parking lot – we would never have budget problems again. The east Texas churches prosperity fed into their prosperity gospel – God had blessed them but the end times were coming so drill, drill, drill. Oil exploration spread to the Louisiana Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula and then J.H. Pew and Sunoco began looking north to Alberta, soon to be called the Texas of Canada.

The Leduc oil patch was discovered in 1947 and then preacher and Premier Ernest Manning and the Social Credit party was interested in preserving oil profits to benefit Albertans. Premier Manning was also evangelical and shared faith and conversation with oil industrialist and investor J.H. Pew brokered by Evangelist Billy Graham – who genuinely was more interested in the spread of the gospel than oil exploration but he knew who buttered his bread. When the Athabasca Oil Sands were discovered in 1965 – Sunoco and Pew and Manning and Graham were all at the Grand Opening. Let the extraction begin, praise the Lord.

With Ernest's son Premier Preston Manning and then Premier Harry Strom, Alberta citizen's dividends and public investment in the Oil Sands were reduced. Then

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau fought with Alberta for oil dividends and growing up in Alberta, we all knew he was the anti-Christ. Alberta continued on a politically and religiously conservative track and meanwhile in the US, Republican presidents Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan, and the Texan oil dynasty the Bushes came to power and ruled for decades. There was a brief interlude with President Jimmy Carter, the African-American loving, evangelical Methodist Sunday School teacher from the South who wore a sweater and told Americans to turn down their heat to conserve oil. He didn't last.

Now current President Barack Obama promises change yet seems to struggle with his environmentalist supporters over the Keystone Pipeline to bring Alberta oil to Louisiana refineries. The environmentalists say he is still drunk on oil and hasn't been effective in any kind of renewable energy strategy in wind and solar like the Europeans. Our current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also promises change and progressive strategies on renewable energy. We'll see how that goes. Meanwhile, oil companies like Standard Oil and the Rockefellers are investing in renewable energy. They say, we went from whale oil to crude oil now we are looking at no-oil based industries and profits.

If business is on the cutting edge of renewable energies - what role does faith play in this new energy field today? Evangelicals in the US and Canada are divided over energy. The young evangelicals support Bill McKibben, Methodist Sunday School teacher and environmental activist. They call him the New Noah who will help us build an ark to save us from the rising floodwaters and wildfires due to climate change. McKibben spent 3 days in jail in civil disobedience over Keystone pipeline. His is a faith-based uprising that is working with churches to divest their portfolios from the oil industry as MC Canada has done with Mark Bigland-Pritchard's help.

In Canada, our First Nations are taking the lead in environmental awareness and protection in Idle No More. Zachary Stefaniuk will share what he learned about this at Peace-It-Together youth conference at Canadian Mennonite University...

From what I learned about oil at CMU, I came home and told Patrick we are going to put a solar panel on our new garage that we are building that will power our new electric vehicle. He told me I better keep working at Osler Mennonite to pay for it.

Like the widow of Zarephath who listened to God's prophet and who risked everything in faith, we too are in a precarious position with drought and food sources and climate change. We can't control what is happening but we can trust God to provide in the midst of these changes but it requires some faith and action on our part as well. Like the widow of Zarephath, can we listen to our prophetic aboriginal neighbours and modern-day environmentalist like Naomi Klein, Wendell Berry, and Bill McKibben, even if they get a little irritating sometimes and seem to demand too much? Are we willing to take risks and behavioral changes in response to God's word? Let us pray...