

among us today and some who have passed on into eternal life with Christ. Saints are people who trust in God's power, sometimes seeing it mightily, and sometimes working hard to notice it tucked into the everyday experiences of our world. As we give thanks for these saints today, may we also be on the lookout for God's power appearing before us in mighty ways, and quiet ways. And each time that we notice, may we give thanks that the Lord indeed is God.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

**November 5, 2023**  
**All Saints Celebration**  
**“God’s Power, God’s Saints”**  
**1 Kings 18:20-39**  
**Rev. Emma Nickel**

This is a story about God's power. It's the kind of story that feels so fantastic, you can just picture it on the big screen. The drama of the lone prophet of God, Elijah, facing off against 450 prophets of the so-called god Baal, and King Ahab who followed him. The weeping and crying of those prophets as Baal failed to show up, failed to light the bull on fire at the altar. And then the spectacle of Elijah digging the trench, restoring his altar, soaking the wood with water, to make the feat of setting everything on fire seem almost impossible. Finally, Elijah called on God and the miracle happened. Flames rained down at Elijah's altar; the wet wood was engulfed in fire; the bull was sacrificed. God's power showed up in a heart-stopping way. And the people declared, the Lord indeed is God!

Elijah had faith that God would act. Even when he was all alone, faced with the threat of death from the King, Elijah trusted God to demonstrate that no idol, no statue, no competing idea is powerful in the way that God is powerful. Elijah was also pretty cocky about the whole thing. His mocking of Baal's prophets is no way for us to treat people of other faiths. But we still understand the point of this story. Elijah had confidence and ultimate faith in God's mighty power.

I think many of us wish our lives mirrored this story. That God's power would show up so clearly, so obviously and in such *big* ways whenever we call for it. That God would do just what we thought we needed, whenever we needed it. Because that would probably boost our confidence in calling on God the next time, and the next, too. Sometimes we are able to have that kind of faith. And sometimes God does show up in big and sweeping ways. But our relationship with God's power is more complicated. Many of us have felt like Elijah, in need of God as we stand out in front of an enemy - whether that enemy is the threat of death, or pain; an unwell loved one or a brokenness in

<sup>1</sup> Keena Alwahaidi, "Volunteer 'finishers' help complete knitting projects started by late loved ones," CBC Radio, Feb 15, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/loose-ends-knitting-program-1.6748295>.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Bebinger, "When illness or death leave craft projects unfinished, these strangers step in to help," NPR, July 25, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/07/25/1189872837/when-illness-or-death-leave-craft-projects-unfinished-these-strangers-step-in-to-kings-1817-19-20-39-2>.

our life we cannot fix. Or we have felt at a total loss as we look out on the troubles of the world - the horrors of war, the sins of the past that continue to harm in the present, the myriad threats caused by our warming planet. In the face of all that, we pray and beg and plead and call on God to save us, to intervene, to show up in a big way. We do believe it is within God's power to do so. This story, and so many others in the Bible, tell us so. And, most of us have had times in our own lives when we know God clearly showed up to help us. But a lot of times, after our bold, heartfelt prayers, we find ourselves standing there, with a pile of wet wood and no flames in sight. That's a hard spot to be in. Maybe an embarrassing one, depending on who's watching. But more likely, it's just a place that feels painful and lonely. Maybe even angry and frustrated. Which can also leave us wondering about God's power, and if it's really real.

Elijah knew that that place of limping about, doubting God was not a good place to be. That's why he created this whole scene in the first place, to show there was nothing to fear; God was really God. And at that time, God did show up in a mighty way, through fire and smoke and flame. The sign was so clear, no one could miss it. And perhaps that clarity is actually what causes *us* to doubt. Because we begin to expect that God's power will always show up in that clear, mighty, unmistakable way - a burning bush, flames at the altar, tongues of fire. But as we move through the Bible this fall, we are seeing that God acts differently at different times. At creation and in Genesis, God spoke directly. By the time of Ruth, God's word was mediated through prophets. In the time of Elijah, they were seeing God's signs. Jesus became the incarnational way God spoke. Now we feel God's power in sacraments and scripture. And so often, we sense God's power through the gifts of other people in our community. It's not that God's power is absent when we call for it. It's that we constantly need to train our eyes to see it, our hearts to feel it. Because God's power today rarely looks like flames licking up the water in a show of might. Yet God is still powerfully present.

For some people, God's power feels like the softness of knitted yarn, or the warmth of a hand sewn quilt. Annie Gatewood's mother was a lifelong knitter. She was in the process of making a sweater for each of her grandchildren, when she was diagnosed with lymphoma. She had completed three of the sweaters, but she died six months later without getting to finish them. As Annie grieved the loss of her

mother, she wished she had all those sweaters to give to each of the grandkids as a tangible reminder of her mom's love. But that hope didn't seem possible. Until last September, when Annie connected with the Loose Ends project. Loose Ends seeks to connect crafters with people who have a project left unfinished by a loved one who has died. From knitted items and weaving, to hooked rugs and crocheted scarves, the group finds Finishers, as they call them, who can take the project from wherever it is, mid-stitch, and bring it to completion. Loose Ends says they want to "keep loved ones close by completing the projects they've left behind." When Annie received the completed sweaters back from her Finisher and offered them to the grandkids, she said, "There was a sense of peace for me."<sup>1</sup>

Annie called on God for comfort in her grief and God powerfully showed up. In the gift of the completed craft, but also in the new connection between her grieving family and the Finisher, who's gift of grace, time, and love, embodied the love of God. One of the founders of Loose Ends says, "The most fulfilling thing for me, so far, has been watching strangers take care of each other, [without regard for politics, religion or other sometimes divisive identities]. It's an opportunity to relate on a human level through a shared desire to bring comfort."<sup>2</sup> That's the mighty power of God at work - in the quiet click of knitting needles, in the busy hands of crafters, and in a new connection formed amidst grief, friendship, and love.

Loose Ends stories don't play well on the big screen, the way Elijah's encounter would. Neither do many of our stories where God's power shows up quietly, under the radar. Part of our discipleship is training our eyes and our hearts to look for God's power - in obvious and flashy places. And in hidden, out of the way places. Whenever we notice God's power in any of these places, it makes us want to put our confidence and faith in God, the way Elijah did, more and more, time after time. Because we know God does show up. God's power is real.

Elijah trusted in God's power even in the face of adversity and discouragement. Even when he was the only person in the whole land saying, "I trust that God can do things that seem impossible." He was remembered throughout the Old Testament and he even showed up at Jesus' transfiguration, when Jesus glowed with the divine presence. Today, you and I might just call Elijah a saint. That's what the Protestant church calls all people who live their lives in faith, who trust in God, and who seek to share God's love. Those who serve as finishers with Loose Ends are saints, too. You know plenty of saints, some