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After months of packing boxes, loading trucks, lifting furniture, unpacking boxes, trying to decide where to place everything in our house, and feeling a sore back, I said to Staci one evening, “I think I’m running out of steam.”

“Running out of what?” she asked.

“Steam,” I replied, and then I realized that’s a strange expression. The phrase “running out of steam” comes from the days of steam powered engines that would begin to slow down when the fire heating the boiler began to dwindle, thereby reducing the amount of steam to power the engine. The phrase comes from the early 19th century, with one of the first uses recorded in a newspaper in Iowa in January 1898.¹ The phrase is often used today to express exhaustion, tiredness, and the feeling that you just can’t continue.

How many of you have ever had a day when you feel as though you’re running out of steam? I imagine every one of us has had one of those days.

Since most steam-powered technology, however, has been replaced by other forms of

power, today we might update the phrase to something such as, “I’m running out of oil,” though that might create a panic if someone overheard your comment and feared our natural oil supplies were running low.

In the story from 1 Kings, we hear of someone concerned about literally running out of oil. Several thousand years ago there was a widow in the town of Zarephath, which is located in the modern-day country of Lebanon along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

She was afraid of running out of oil—not the oil to run our modern-day vehicles—but cooking oil to bake bread so she and her son could eat and survive. There had been no rain in the land for many months, and food and water were hard to find. As she was gathering sticks by the town gate, the prophet Elijah showed up. Elijah had been eating bread delivered by ravens and water from the stream until the water dried up.

“Excuse me, mam, but could give me a drink of water in my cup?”

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She could have argued that water was scarce to find, or she could have suggested that he get it himself, for she was busy gathering sticks to make a fire at home to bake some bread for her son.

But she agreed and fetched some water for Elijah. But that wasn't enough. "Now could you get some bread for me?" he asked her.

She's not even at home to cook. She's at the city gate gathering firewood. Doesn't it seem a bit rude and presumptuous for Elijah to now ask her for bread?

The woman replied, "I swear, as surely as your GOD lives, I don't have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we'll die."²

She was not only afraid of running out of oil, but running out of steam as well, for she felt this might be her last meal with her son before they died.

When have you reached those moments in life, when you feel as though you might be running out of steam?

The baby has been crying all night long, and as a new parent you don't know what to do. You're exhausted and need some sleep, but the cries of your infant propel you to keep going.

The bills have piled up on the kitchen counter. They need to be paid, but the outgoing expenses seem to outpace the incoming money.

The visit to the doctor's office results in a stay in the hospital for medical tests, where you hear a diagnosis that requires more extensive treatment and an uncertain outcome.

We might even feel we are running out of steam and oil in our life together as church.

When the pews could hold more people than we have gathered on Sunday morning, we remember the days when they were full and we may wonder, "What happened?"

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When the repairs on our building seem unmanageable, we may wonder how to keep it going.

When the income seems less than the expenses, we may fear that the future is bleak.

When we look around us and see lots of people going to the megachurches, we may feel they have an advantage that we don't have. "It's just not fair," we might mutter as we feel sorry for ourselves.

Famous Disciples preacher Fred Craddock once told a story about a group of children who felt life was unfair:

In a certain village the school bell rang at 8:30 a.m. to call the children to class. The boys and girls left their homes and toys reluctantly, creeping like snails into the school, not late but not a second early. The bell rang again at 3:30 p.m., releasing the children to their homes and toys, to which they rushed at the very moment of the tolling of the bell. This is how it was every day, with every child except one. She came early to help the teacher prepare the

room and materials for the day. She stayed late to help the teacher clean the board, dust erasers, and put away materials. And during the day she stayed close to the teacher, all eyes and ears for the lessons being taught. One day when noise and inattention were worse than usual, the teacher called the class to order. Pointing to the little girl in the front row, the teacher said, 'Why can't you be as she is? She comes early to help, she stays late to help, and all day long she is attentive and courteous.'

"It isn't fair to ask us to be like she is," said one boy from the rear of the room.

"Why?"

"Because she has an advantage," he replied.

"I don't understand. What is her advantage?" asked the puzzled teacher.

The boy almost whispered as he sat down, "She is an orphan."³

Sometimes we may think situations in our lives aren't fair, that others have an advantage that we don't have. The woman from Zarephath may have

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felt that Elijah had more advantages than her, that life was not fair since she had to gather wood, but ravens had delivered food to Elijah. She could have replied, “Find your own water and bread. It’s not fair that I have to gather wood to build a fire while you go around asking widows for food.”

But instead through her hospitality, she discovered something amazing. Elijah encouraged her by speaking words that echo throughout the Bible, “do not be afraid”—the same words angels would speak thousands of years later in a field as they announced the surprising birth of Jesus: “Do not be afraid.” When chaos enters our lives, we will feel anxiety and uncertainty, but God promises to always remain with us. We do not need to fear being abandoned, for God remains with us through the good and bad moments of life.

Elijah explained, “The jar of flour won’t decrease and the bottle of oil won’t run out until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.” One writer observed:

Notice that they will not be full, so God’s provision may not always be overflowing abundance, but they won’t run out until God sends rain. At that time, they will be empty; God will then provide in new and different ways.⁴

We may not have everything in our personal lives or even in our life as a church together. We may feel as though we are running out of oil, that we don’t have enough steam to get to the next day, or month, or year. And although we may not have an overflowing abundance, God’s care for us won’t run out. When we find ourselves empty, God can fill us with something new and surprising.

¹ www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/308200.html

² 1 Kings 17:12, *The Message Bible*

³ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, 2001, p. 16.

⁴ Sara Koenig, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2987