

**LENT AS A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE**  
**2. ELIJAH AND BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY**

(03/07/10)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Kings 19:1-18

*“The angel of the Lord came to him a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He [Elijah] got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.” (1 Kings 19:7-8)*

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, which is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, is a time that we set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter. During this time, Christians express their thankfulness for the sacrificial love of Jesus by participating in a spiritual discipline of fasting, penance, and reflection. In the early church, the season of Lent was the period of instruction for catechumens, those who desire to be baptized into the Christian faith. The baptism traditionally takes place on Easter Eve.

The forty days of Lent reminds us of several places in the Bible where a wilderness experience is tied to the number forty. As we heard last week, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness following his baptism. This morning we heard the story of the prophet Elijah and his preparation for the forty days of his wilderness journey.

If we use the spiritual disciplines of Lent to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within us, then we may be able to experience the healing, comforting, strengthening energy of God when we, like Jesus and Elijah, pass through what the 23rd Psalm calls “the valley of deep darkness.” If we can do this, we will not only survive our wilderness experiences, we will be psychologically or spiritually transformed by them.

By the time we’re done with our Lenten series, you are all going to be experts on the number forty. I know what you’re thinking: that plus \$1.99 will get me a large Dunkin Donuts coffee. Jim Holmes, I’m sure, is just dying to remind us that that plus \$.99 will get us a large Cumberland Farms coffee. But you never know. When you

reach the pearly gates, wouldn't you be surprised if the entrance exam was about the archetypal significance of the number forty? Then you'd be happy that you were here.

What do we know about Elijah? Elijah was an Israelite prophet who lived in the first half of the ninth century B.C., during the reign of kings Ahab and Ahaziah. Elijah is the protagonist of four stories in the book of Kings. Today we are focusing on the latter part of the first of these stories. The basic story is as follows.

Elijah calls forth a drought from God to punish Israel for worshiping false gods. During the famine that follows, Elijah survives by hiding himself away. The drought ends in a contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal: the god who answers his prophet's call by burning the sacrifice with fire from heaven is declared to be the one true god. Elijah wins; Yahweh, the God of Israel is vindicated; and Elijah then slaughters four hundred of the priests of Baal.

The wicked queen Jezebel, seeking vengeance for the slaughter of her priests, vows to kill Elijah. Elijah flees to Horeb, where he has a powerful religious experience. He is commanded by God to anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha to carry forth the fight against Baal. The first story ends with Elisha becoming Elijah's disciple.

This morning I would like us to focus on the experience of Elijah as he is fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel. Elijah comes to Beersheba, which should be a relatively safe place since it is part of the territory of the tribe of Judah. Scripture tells us that Elijah leaves his servant there while he goes forth alone into the wilderness.

This passage of scripture reminds me of the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob, who has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, flees for his life to Haran where he stays with and works for his uncle Laban. But Jacob cannot stay there forever. Sooner or later he has to return to the land of his birth and claim his place in the spiritual evolution of his people. On his way back, the day before he is going to meet his estranged brother, Jacob leaves his two wives, his eleven children, and his servants

and enters the wilderness alone. There he has a powerful religious experience; he wrestles with an angel who both wounds him and blesses him.

Like Jacob, Elijah has his encounter with the angel of God when he is alone by himself in the wilderness. The wilderness is not only a physical place. It is the mental and spiritual state in which we find ourselves during the difficult times of our lives. The wilderness experience is the time of trial, the time of ordeal, the time when we are tempted to turn back to a life which we know is not really healthy, which is not really meant to be our future. According to scripture, the wilderness is often the place where we encounter or are encountered by God.

1 Kings 19:4 tells us that Elijah goes a day's journey into the wilderness and sits down under a solitary broom tree. Elijah is afraid for his life. Scripture tells us,

*[Elijah] asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.*

Elijah is depressed. If you have ever been depressed, you will recognize the symptoms. Elijah engages in negativistic thinking. He has withdrawn from others and from life. He is not eating or drinking. He is feeling helpless and hopeless. He suffers from suicidal ideation, believing that the world would be better off without him. He seeks to escape his inner torment by falling asleep.

If you have ever been depressed, if you have ever had a wilderness experience, you might recognize some of these symptoms. You might also find it heartening to remember that one of the greatest prophets of all time experienced the very same psychological and spiritual struggles and torments that you do when he went through his own wilderness experience.

Elijah, in the throes of despair, upset that life isn't going the way he wanted, lies down under a tree and falls asleep. Suddenly an angel appears. And what does the

angel say to Elijah? What words of wisdom does this messenger from God bring to Elijah? The angel tells Elijah, "Get up and eat."

Get up and eat. These are indeed words of wisdom for Elijah and also for us when we are passing through the valley of deep darkness. Elijah, like all of us, has outer problems, but his outer problems are exacerbated by his inner attitude. Elijah wishes his outer problems would go away. He wishes they would disappear. He doesn't think it is fair that he should be unjustly persecuted. So he curls up under his little tree and sulks.

Get up and eat. Get dressed. Go to work. Clean your house. Go for a walk. Call a friend. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself because life is unjust or unfair. Life is life. You have a job to do. Get up and do it.

If we think of the angel as a psychotherapist, I think we would say that the angel is a little light on the sympathy that is regarded as such an important part of therapy. The angel doesn't want to hear Elijah's complaints about his life, about how life is both tough and unfair. The angel knows that Elijah has a job to do, a contribution to make to life on behalf of God. This is not the time for Elijah to sit around sucking his thumb and feeling sorry for himself. The angel tells Elijah: "Get up. Eat. Begin the journey."

Elijah rises and discovers that the angel has miraculously provided him with the food he needs for his journey. Scripture tells us that when we are in the wilderness, God will provide. God fed the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness with quail, with manna from heaven, with water from the rock. When Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, "the angels ministered to him." When we are in the wilderness, all we need to do is open our eyes. God has already provided what we need. All we have to do is rise and partake.

Elijah does as the angel commands, but then he suffers a relapse. He decides to go back to sleep. He is still stuck in his depression. He is still feeling the power of that inertia that makes it difficult for us to get out of bed some mornings. The angel returns

to Elijah. The angel tells Elijah to get up and eat. The angel tells him that if he doesn't take care of himself, he will not have the strength he needs to undertake the journey, a journey that will last forty days.

What feeds us when we are stuck in the depression that often accompanies a wilderness experience? Some people are fed through psychotherapy or support groups. Some find emotional nourishment through the encouragement of friends. Some rediscover a reservoir of energy when they force their body to move, when they go back to the gym or just take a walk. Some are fed by reading something that helps them understand what it is that has pulled them under. Some are fed by music. Different things feed different people.

There are some things, however, that feed all people. No matter who we are and what sort of wilderness experience we are engaged in, we can all reach out to others. The best remedy for us when we are feeling sorry for ourselves is to reach out to someone in need. How many fathers get out of bed and put one foot in front of another because they have a commitment to support their family? How many mothers keep going because they know their children need them? We can all reach out to someone in need. The energy that we can find when we do this is nourishment for our soul. It is truly bread for the journey.

No matter what sort of wilderness we are experiencing, like Elijah, we can be fed by the Word of God. We can turn to the words of scripture for comfort and guidance. We can open ourselves to God in prayer. We can talk to God or Jesus about what we are going through. We can become an integral part of a church community. God reaches out to us in many different ways, including the church. All we need to do is wake up. All we need to do is get up and eat.

Elijah gets up, takes the nourishment that has been provided by the angel, and then sets off on his journey. He travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. At Mount Horeb God appears to Elijah as a great wind, an earthquake, a fire,

and finally, in “a sound of sheer silence.” Following his religious experience, Elijah is told how he is to proceed in his ongoing battle against the priests of Baal.

The bread and wine that is given to a penitent by a priest during the sacramental administration of last rites, is called the viaticum. The word “viaticum” literally means “bread for the journey.” It is a spiritual nourishment, a spiritual sustenance for the journey upon which the dying person is about to embark.

The sacrament that we share with each other this morning is also bread for the journey, for the journey we take in this life. It is bread for that spiritual journey that we know as a wilderness experience. It was given to us by Jesus to help us remember that he is with us, even in difficult times. It is the gift of his presence both within and among us this morning.

In this sacrament Jesus reaches out to us just like the angel reached out to Elijah. Jesus does not promise to take away our struggle, to spare us from having to undergo our wilderness experience. He promises that he will give us what we need to go through it, what we need to survive it, and, like Elijah, what we need to be spiritually and psychologically transformed by it.

Let us now experience and celebrate the presence of Christ in this sacrament, in this church, and in our lives. Let us partake together of the bread that strengthens us for the journey that is set before us by God.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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