

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY 2

(09/03/17)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 19:1-12

Mark 1:12-13

“Then [Elijah] lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’” (1 Kings 19:5)

For our communion reflections over the next few months we will continue to explore the metaphor of “bread for the journey.” This morning we listened to a passage from the first book of Kings that relates certain events in the life of the prophet Elijah.

In the preceding chapter Elijah sets up a showdown with the priests of the Canaanite God Baal on Mt. Carmel. During this test of the relative power of these two gods, Yahweh of the Israelites and Baal of the Canaanites, Yahweh sends down fire to burn up the sacrifice, while Baal can't. Following his triumph, Elijah orders hundreds of the priests of Baal to be killed.

The part where the triumphant Elijah has the priests of Baal killed is not one of my favorite passages of scripture. It implies there is only one way to worship God, only one name by which this God can be called. It implies that all those who do not understand God as we do are in error and deserve to die--in fact our God wants us to kill them. The belief that there is no room for diversity, for the differences of opinion that arise from different perspectives has contributed to the great ongoing tragedy of the Middle East and beyond.

I don't think Jesus would approve of the way Elijah handled those whose beliefs differed from his. There was no love or charity in Elijah's heart or in the heart of the God who condoned such an act of vengeance. In fact, I'm not sure the God who Jesus incarnated was this bloodthirsty tribal warrior god of Israel.

Baal was not an evil god; he was simply a god of nature. “Baal” was the name that the Canaanites and the Phoenicians gave to the great spirit of life. He was known as Baal of the Heavens, and was considered to be especially important in bringing rain. At the time of the showdown on Mt. Carmel, the country was suffering from a drought, perhaps an indication of the limitations of the worship of pagan or nature gods in the whole scope of religious development.

Ahab, the king of Israel during the time of Elijah, was a follower of Yahweh. However, Jezebel, Ahab's wife, was a patron of Baal. Jezebel did not convert when she married Ahab. She not only held to her religion; she persecuted the prophets of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

After Elijah wins the showdown with the priests of Baal, humiliating and then killing them, Jezebel becomes enraged and threatens to kill Elijah by the end of the following day. Elijah flees in fear from Israel to Judah, the southern kingdom, out of Jezebel's jurisdiction. He leaves his servant in Beer-Sheba and goes on alone, a day's journey into the wilderness.

Only a day before, Elijah was on the top of the world. He now feels that the rug has been pulled from under his feet. He had enjoyed his victory; now he suffers defeat. He had been in a position of power; now he feels completely powerless. He had been a hero; now he is an outcast.

Threatened by Jezebel, Elijah backs off from the challenge that lies before him and runs away to Judah. He believes that Yahweh has deserted him. He sulks, complaining that life is unfair. He says that of all of Yahweh's followers, "I, even I only, am left." Exhausted and depressed he falls asleep under a broom tree, a common desert tree that grows to about ten feet.

While he is asleep under the broom tree, feeling alone and depressed, feeling helpless and hopeless, an angel of the Lord comes to him. Elijah is awakened from his slumber when the angel asks him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Great question! The angel then gives Elijah supernatural food that provides him with the strength he needs to continue his journey to Mt. Horeb, the place where he will receive his religious experience and his new call as a prophet.

At Mt. Horeb, Elijah hears the voice of God. His courage is restored. He formulates a new plan of action. The experience under the broom tree and the experience in the cave totally transform his life.

We can see from this passage of scripture that Elijah, one of the greatest Old Testament prophets, was not a saint; he was a human being just like us. Elijah had his strengths and his weaknesses. He handled some of the events of his life well, and others not so well. But Elijah continued to trust in the Lord and to grow. Elijah learned some valuable lessons about life.

As we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion this morning, as we partake of this "bread for the journey," let us think about what Elijah learned from his desert experiences, his experiences under the broom tree and in the cave, and what Elijah might teach us about the challenges that life places before us.

If Elijah were here with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would tell us that life has its ups and downs. He would tell us that life is great when you're on top, but not so great when the ground sinks beneath you.

As you sit in silence during our communion service this morning, think about the ups and downs of your life, both the past and the present. Then bring them before God. *(pause)*

If Elijah were here with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would tell us that even though we think we are alone when we are going through difficult times, it isn't true. He would remind us that even Jesus suffered and felt alone. Even at times when we feel most alone, God is with us. When Jesus was in the wilderness, scripture tells us "angels waited on him."

As you sit in silence during our communion service this morning, think about whether you are really alone. Bring to mind those people who love you and are there for you. Think about your friends, people who care. You are not alone. *(pause)*

If Elijah were here with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would tell us about the importance of courage in facing the challenges of life. Courage, the keystone in the arch of character, gives us the strength and stability we need to face our trials and tribulations. We need to be able to stand firm in the face of adversity.

As you sit in silence during our communion service this morning, open your heart to the courage that arises from your religious faith, the courage that is one of the gifts of the Spirit. You need this courage to stand firm in time of adversity. In Psalm 27:14 we are told: "Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart." Open yourself to God, be of good courage, and *he will strengthen your heart.* *(pause)*

If Elijah were with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would challenge us to not adopt a victim stance and withdraw from life because we feel that life is unfair. Elijah would help us move past the paralysis of our depression just as the angel did for Elijah when he asked him, "Elijah, what are you doing?" Elijah would challenge us to move out of our cave mentality, our self-imposed prisons. Many times in our life, he would ask us what we think we are doing.

As you sit in silence during our communion service this morning, think about your self-imposed prisons, the times when you sulk around feeling life is unfair, believing that God has deserted you just because you are hurting. Then let God help you by lifting you out of your littleness. Psalm 118:5 tells us: "I called upon the Lord in my distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place." We often need to move into a larger place, to see the larger picture, to see matters from a different perspective. *(pause)*

If Elijah were here with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would challenge us to let go of our bitterness, our desire for revenge. This is hard to do because we want other

people to suffer just as we suffer. We want justice, even though we know that justice does not always come in this lifetime. The German poet Heinrich Heine describes his deepest wishes, the conditions that attend his vision of happiness when he says:

My wishes are a humble dwelling with a thatched roof, a good bed, good food, flowers at my windows, and some fine tall trees before my door. And if the good God wants to make me completely happy he will grant me the joy of seeing six or seven of my enemies hanging from those trees.

There are times when we share Heine's view of what would make us happy, but when we think about it, especially when our thinking is shaped by taking on the heart and the mind of Jesus, when we look at life with the eyes of an enlightened heart, we know that we are better than this.

As you sit in silence during the quiet of our communion service this morning, think about whether there is someone you need to forgive. Let the bitterness go. It will poison your soul and cut you off from life. *(pause)*

And finally, if Elijah were here with us this morning, what would he tell us? Elijah would tell us that when we feel alone, lost, and depressed, if we wake up and open our eyes, we might see that the angel of the Lord is with us, providing the spiritual food that we need to continue our journey. This is what happened to Jesus and how he survived his time in the wilderness: the angels waited on him. Elijah would tell us to arise and eat. Elijah would remind us that in many different ways, God provides us with bread for the journey.

In the quiet of our communion service this morning, let us open our heart to the sacrament that we are receiving: the body and blood of Christ, bread for the journey. If we do this, then, like Elijah, we may hear that still small voice, the sound of a gentle stillness, that voice of God that would guide us through the amazing journey of our life.

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