

Pentecost 11, 8.8.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

“The Bread of Life”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

It is often a surprising how the readings for a given Sunday can address our circumstances and the times in which we live. This is amazing given that Elijah lived in the 9th century BCE, nearly 3,000 years ago. Today’s reading from 1 Kings describes Elijah fleeing for his life from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Exhausted and fatigued, Elijah sat down under a broom or juniper tree and asked God that he might die. Elijah seemed to have lost the hope and strength to journey any further.

Elijah had fled for his life because Ahab and Jezebel were violently suppressing the worship of Yahweh, and Elijah himself was a prophet of Yahweh. Yet the core background of this story is that Israel was experiencing severe drought, famine and hunger. For Elijah what was at stake was calling Israel to return to the worship of Yahweh, the source of abundant life.

Ahab and Jezebel had led Israel away from Yahweh and into the worship of a Canaanite god named Baal. And though Baal was supposed to be the god of rain, drought, famine and hunger covered the land. This drought and hunger was also symbolic of Israel’s own spiritual drought and hunger, for they had ignored the worship of Yahweh.

In the lead-up to today’s reading, Elijah proposed a contest on Mount Carmel between Baal and Yahweh. It was decided that whichever deity sent fire, lighting either the sacrifice of the prophets of Baal or the sacrifice of Elijah, would be declared almighty. So the prophets of Baal invoked their god from morning to evening, but nothing happened; however, when Elijah invoked the name of Yahweh, lightning struck the altar he had made, igniting the fire. Soon afterwards clouds gathered and rain fell. Yahweh was victorious and Elijah vindicated.

Yet Elijah’s victory was short-lived because Jezebel, in a jealous rage, threatened to kill Elijah. So we meet Elijah in today’s reading tired of fighting, tired of running, tired of the famine, and tired of a nation that could not decide which god they would worship.

Discouraged, Elijah sat down next to a broom tree in the wilderness and asked that he might die. He said, “*It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.*” After saying this Elijah fell into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

Perhaps you can identify a bit with Elijah. Perhaps you have been so tired that the moment you

sat down, you immediately fell asleep. Perhaps in spite of all of your best efforts, and even successes and victories, you realized that you are still human – that you are no different than those human beings who have struggled before you. Tired of it all, all the fighting about god, and now pursued by those who would kill him, Elijah asked Yahweh to take his life.

Perhaps like you, I turned on the local news last Wednesday only to hear that the number of new Covid cases in the state of North Carolina is the highest since last February. This report shook me and in an instant I felt deflated. I asked myself, “Have we really made any progress?”

I think we can understand a bit of the feeling of Elijah. Even if we might not be ready to ask God to take away our life, we are exhausted from running in the wilderness of a pandemic and from fleeing the unseen foe that pursues this generation and all of humanity around the world.

Like Elijah, we are, in a sense, running scared, pursued by a pandemic and the storm of assailants that surround it. The pandemic has shaken our own nation’s leadership and people are as bitterly divided as Israel was between Baal and Yahweh. Political division, shaken national confidence, and personal grief for loved ones of the 4.2 million people around the world, and the nearly 620,000 people in the United States who have died from this pandemic is inescapable. Like ancient Israel and Elijah who faced a drought, famine and hunger, we continue to face a relentless pandemic. Pandemic fatigue is real, as is the reality of the spiritual fatigue we also feel. We may ask, “Where is God in the midst of all of this?”

Elijah’s words, “*for I am no better than my ancestors*” resonate deeply within me. For all of our modernity, and for all of our scientific advancement, we are no better than our ancestors. We are human: we are subject to all of the same viruses and illnesses; we are subject to the same spiritual needs and longings; and we will not live forever.

Yet the absolutely reassuring message of today’s readings is that God knows our fears, our fatigue and our longings. Where is God? God prepares a table in our midst from which God feeds us, so that renewed, like Elijah, we might continue our journeys.

An angel of the Lord woke Elijah twice, urging him to eat and drink, to fortify himself for the journey of forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Elijah arrived forty days later at Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai.

Yet imagine if Elijah had really given up – he would not have reached the cave on Mount Horeb, and he would not have heard the “still small voice” of God after the wind, earthquake and fire. It was only by journeying into the wilderness and enduring the wind, earthquake and fire that Elijah’s

faith in Yahweh grew allowing him to truly hear God's voice in silence.

Today's psalm ends with the words, "*O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.*" Elijah tasted and was nourished by God; Elijah took refuge in Yahweh and lived. I am sure that all of you have stories of feeling burned out and fatigued by life, and of also finding refuge in the grace of God's presence.

I am certainly not Elijah, but I have endured the winds of typhoons, the tumult of earthquakes and their fires. On March 11, 2011 Mari and I experienced the Tohoku Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown. Though we lived in Tokyo, our lives were shaken as they had never been shaken before. We endured aftershocks that felt nearly as severe as the original quake. We tried to sleep, but could not because of the constant aftershocks. We kept packed luggage next to the bed, and two days later, we were ordered to flee, to evacuate to a safer place by the ELCA Global Mission leadership in Chicago.

We did not want to go, and with tears and much reluctance we left Tokyo at 3 am, driving away from our home, from the people we were sent to serve, our car packed with what belongings we could carry – not knowing if we would be able to return.

I am not exaggerating when I say it felt like death. We would have done anything but evacuate, but we were ordered to move to a point further south and wait. And so we followed those instructions. Though we were allowed to return after two weeks, I share this experience because I know a similar feeling again in this pandemic. We are in the wilderness unsure of where we are traveling, and when we will be able to return to a place of quiet familiarity and easy human community.

We are no different than our ancestors. Life continues to come at us whether it is drought, hurricane, earthquakes, a pandemic, social strife, racism or every form of human discrimination and fear of the Other. We are no different than our ancestors. For all of our modernity we cannot live without the one who comes to us in the Holy Supper, saying, "*This is my body given for you.*"

Like the food that sustained Elijah in the wilderness, Jesus continues to come to us saying, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" The question we must ask ourselves is whether will we quiet ourselves from the noise and the divisiveness of the world and its storms, to hear the life-giving "still small voice" of the Savior who says, "*I am the bread of life - whoever believes has eternal life.*"

We are no different than our ancestors. Like them, we have been through storm, wind, earthquake

and now pandemic. We are no different, and like our ancestors we need the one who gives his body for the life of the world. In Christ, we participate in eternal life now; we know God's saving grace now, even in a pandemic. In spite of being tired and fatigued, Jesus comes to us in his Holy Supper.

I know that none of us wants to wear masks, or do all of the things we know we need to do to get through this pandemic. I get it. We are all tired. Yet I also know that our humanity is capable of great things. Jesus, the living Word of God became fully human to show us what our humanity is truly capable of. We are capable of carrying the infinite grace of God within the broken earthen vessels of our minds and bodies.

I know from history and from my own experience that human beings can come together to do the good they know they should do in times of national and global emergency. As our ancestors did in the past, we are called to set aside our differences, to lift up the weak, to look past our fears, and to embrace the health and lives of others in this world God so loves. And so we wear masks, get vaccinated and work for the greater good, because Christ calls us to be his body of grace in this world. Being Christ's body in the world means caring about the health of others around us.

In today's second reading, Paul writes of becoming "*imitators of God*" – of our lives being "*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*" by imitating the sacrificial love of Christ for others. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*" This is what is required of us to get through a pandemic. Instead of wrangling and slander, Paul encourages us so that our "*words may give grace to those who hear.*"

A high school teacher of mine often said, "Cooperate and graduate." His words were, of course, said to a group of unruly and at times immature teenage boys in my Jesuit high school. Yet those words have stayed with me over the years. I think of them now as, an at times, unruly and uncooperative adult. God seeks our cooperation for the life of the world. How will we respond?

God asks us to cooperate with the gift of grace by living for others and by becoming Christ's body in this world of storms, earthquakes and pandemic. God meets us in our wilderness, where we realize we are no different than our ancestors – we are all people in need of grace.

Fed by Jesus, the bread of life, we become life-giving grace for others. Like Elijah may we journey on, nourished by grace, doing what needs to be done and living for others. Amen.