



“Bread for the Journey”
Scripture – 1 Kings 19:4-8
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, August 12, 2018

Over the past few weeks, we have eaten our fill of bread. First there were the five loaves and two fish, which Jesus multiplied in order to satisfy a multitude. Then there was the bread from heaven, which gives life to the world. And now we feast on cakes of bread and water in the wilderness.

It seems we are carb-loading. I don't know if this is preparation for some sort of spiritual marathon, or simply the gift our calendar of readings offers as the sustenance we crave for the extraordinary day or the everyday. We all need bread for the journey. Just like the prophet Elijah.

When we meet Elijah in today's passage from Kings, he is in a pitiful state. He can't take it anymore; he's had enough. It is clear that he's feeling overwhelmed and desperate, and we can understand why. You see – at this point in the story, Elijah is on the run. He's running for his life, fleeing one of the most notorious villains in Scripture.

I'm guessing most of us do not regularly immerse ourselves in the stories of Israel's kings. So here's a recap:

Since starting his ministry, Elijah has been at odds with the powers that be (as prophets often are). This prophet's first mission was to warn King Ahab about a drought that would plague Israel for years. And since that first announcement back in Chapter 17, he's been a thorn in the side of the royal family. Elijah reprimands Ahab for worshipping other gods, and blames Queen Jezebel for leading the king astray. Elijah is not making any friends at the palace.

And then comes a contest of power. Elijah gathers all the people of Israel, and all the priests of the false god Baal on top of Mount Carmel. And the prophet calls upon the Lord, who descends on the mountain to demonstrate, definitively, that the Lord alone is God. This is the high point of Elijah's career.

But then things fall apart. Elijah comes down the mountain to a vindictive villain. Jezebel has learned that Elijah killed the priests of Baal, and she threatens to do the same to him.

So Elijah makes a run for it. He flees to the wilderness – where we find him under a solitary broom tree. The landscape, certainly, looks different than it did on top of that mountain; the journey has become more treacherous. And so, the prophet – alone in his desperation – lifts up his voice and cries: “It is enough, Lord!”

Perhaps you have traveled this road before. Perhaps – like Elijah – you’ve found yourself in the wilderness, feeling alone and overwhelmed and desperate. Maybe your wilderness looks a bit different than the Judean desert where we find our prophet today. But the landscape might be just as barren, just as resistant to sustaining life.

Maybe yours is the wilderness of grief; you’ve wandered here for months or years without finding the way out, and it’s just becoming more than you can bear. Maybe it’s the wilderness of illness or addiction, and you’ve been trudging along feeling helpless and drained as you watch your vitality – or that of someone you love – slip away. Maybe it’s the wilderness of stress – stress that comes from deadline after deadline; or from bills piling up; or from a marriage falling apart. Or the wilderness of despair, which — with the hostility that plagues our common life and the unending stream of news-worthy crises — is an all-too-familiar landscape for many of us.

Whichever wilderness we have wandered in – or are currently wandering in – most of us reach a point where the journey is too much. And – like Elijah – when we come to a solitary broom tree in the wilderness, we sit down and cry out to God in despair: “Enough, God! It’s too much!”

We are not the first ones to come to this point. Elijah was not the first one to come to this point. It’s an inevitable stop on the journey. We all get to a point – sometimes many times along the way – where we cry out to God because the way is too much, because we are crumbling under the weight of our burdens, and we just can’t make it on our own.

We see this moment recorded in Scripture over and over again. Elijah is not alone in his lament.

We see Hagar and Ishmael come to this point when they are wandering in the Wilderness of Beersheba – the same wilderness, it turns out, as Elijah. Do you remember the story? Abraham has cast out the slave woman and her child, sending them away with nothing but bread and a skin of water. And when the water runs out – and Hagar is sure they will die – she puts her son beneath a bush, and she sits down, and she weeps.

And we see the Israelites come to this point in the book of Exodus, soon after they cross the Red Sea. As they wander in the wilderness, their stomachs begin to rumble and they lift their voices to complain against Moses: “If only we had died in Egypt where we ate our fill of bread! You have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger!”

And Moses too! When the tasks of leadership weigh heavy, we see Moses himself turn to God and say: “I am not able to carry all this people alone! If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once!”

It would seem that one of the most common refrains in Scripture is: “Enough, God! It’s too much!”

But – thankfully – that is not the refrain that prevails. Thankfully, that is not the last word. The point where our ancestors in faith cry out in despair is never the end of the story.

When Hagar lifts up her voice and weeps, God hears; and an angel of the Lord opens her eyes to see a spring of water where she can fill the skin that had run dry. And when the Israelites complain that their stomachs are empty, God sends manna from heaven to feed them in the wilderness. And when Moses laments that the people are too heavy for him, God calls up elders to share the burden of leadership.

And – of course – God hears Elijah, too. When the prophet sits under that solitary broom tree and cries out, God sends an angel with bread for the journey. The Lord gives Elijah enough food and enough water. Enough that the prophet can continue on his way. Enough that while the journey may be hard, it will not be too much for him.

And the way is not too much for him. As our text tells us, Elijah goes in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights. That bread sustains him on his journey until Mount Horeb, where he meets God again. You might remember that story. You might remember how Elijah waits through wind, and earthquake, and fire, and then meets God in the silence.

You see – for Elijah, God is present in unexpected ways, offering bread for the journey so that the way is not too much. And for Hagar and Ishmael ... and for the Israelites ... and for Moses, God is present in unexpected ways, making sure that the journey is not too much.

And the good news, my friends, is that God continues to be present in unexpected ways when we are wandering through the wilderness. The Spirit of God continues to make sure we have bread for the journey, so that the way will not be too much.

I've seen it.

I saw it when a woman whose body had succumbed to cancer wanted only to be surrounded with love as she neared death. And her sisters and brothers in faith – one after another – sat at her bedside, and listened to her stories, and prayed with her. Their presence was enough – enough that, while the journey was hard, it was not too much.

And I saw it when the community in which I served before coming to Westminster learned that our custodian had fallen on hard times. Sisters and brothers in faith sent food home with his family, and helped them find a safe place to live. Their generosity was enough – enough that, while the journey was hard, it was not too much.

And I saw it when a friend's husband became very ill, and she needed help caring both for him and for their son. Sisters and brothers in faith brought casseroles and drove their son to school and sat with her husband so she could go to work. Their support was enough – enough that, while the journey was hard, it was not too much.

And I see it here — in the ways you care for one another whenever a diagnosis or death, crisis or catastrophe propels sisters and brothers into the wilderness. You ensure that they do not sit alone beneath a solitary broom tree; you serve as reminders of God's provision – even in life's barren places.

God continues to be present in unexpected ways. The Spirit of God continues to make sure we have bread for the journey. Sometimes it looks like prayer at the bedside, or help with rent, or casseroles. Whatever form it takes, God continues to give bread for the journey. Bread that – like the physical bread we eat every time we gather at the Lord's Table, sustains us on our way. Bread that is enough, so that the journey will not be too much.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Our hope lies in you, O God of our salvation. Your steadfast love never ceases; your mercies never come to an end. For your faithfulness to us, we give you thanks. In times of joy, we lift our voices in praise for the blessings we know in you. And when we are weary, or disheartened, or sorrowful – we give thanks for the comfort you bring.

In the stillness of this hour, we open our hearts to your Spirit moving in our midst.

We open our hands to receive bread for the journey. And we open our lips to offer you our prayers:

We pray for your creation, which groans for redemption as nation lifts sword against nation, as our human family lays waste to land and pollutes the sea. With wars and wildfires raging, be with those who flee their homes, and with those who remain as witnesses to the devastation. Lord of Life — Renew and restore your world, and teach us the ways of preservation and peace so that all creation may flourish.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

On the anniversary of the Charlottesville protests, we pray for our nation and lament the fractures that destabilize our common life. We long for a more just world where all people enjoy the gift of life abundant — life marked by freedom, dignity, opportunity. Lord of Love — Heal our brokenness and help us always to do justice and love kindness, until all people experience your wholeness.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray, O God, for every person for whom the journey seems too much:

For those without food or shelter, who are unsure if they will have their daily bread and feel like there is never enough;

For those who suffer the pangs of loss — loss of health, loss of a relationship, loss of a beloved;

For those with aching bodies or ailing minds, and the friends and family who care for them.

Lord of Grace — Sustain these sisters and brothers on their journeys, and give all of us compassionate hearts so that we might be messengers of hope, instruments of peace, and beacons of light.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy God — As we go out from this place, strengthen us for the journey ahead. Open our eyes to encounter you in unexpected people, unexpected places. And renew us by your grace, that we might respond with thanksgiving and follow you with faithful hearts.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who taught us to pray together saying:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.