

John 6:35, 41-51

1 Kings 19:4-8

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Strength for the Journey

The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’

I believe I may have mentioned before how much I appreciate the stories of the Old Testament stories. So many of them seem to speak directly to our human hearts. This one, from First Kings about the prophet Elijah in the wilderness, is a favorite of mine because it feels so human. There is so much pathos, pain and hope all here in these few verses.

We are coming in here the middle of the Elijah story. Elijah may be the most well known of the Hebrew prophets. He is the one, along with Moses, who is seen with Jesus atop the mountain at the transfiguration. In the Hebrew tradition Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. There are some pretty grand events associated with Elijah’s prophetic ministry.

One commentator in summarizing his ministry to this point says, “Elijah is able to bring about miracles through prayer, even raising the dead and calling down fire. He is able to confront a powerful king and accuse him of sin, dares to challenge a large crowd of Baalists (That is, followers of Baal, the Caananite storm god) and out run Ahab’s chariot in a seventeen-mile race.”¹ When we hear the name, Elijah, we are meant to sit up and listen. He is a powerful prophet for God.

A bit of the background to get us to our text for this morning - Elijah’s ministry centered around his confrontations and conflicts with the Israelite king, Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. In the time line of our Biblical history this takes place after the united kingdom, under Kings Saul, David and Solomon, has split into two, the northern and southern kingdoms. Elijah ministered in the northern kingdom, where Ahab was king. Elijah, *on behalf of God*, challenged the politically powerful of his

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3, pg. 138

day, Ahab and his administration, and Ahab did not like what Elijah had to say. Conflict, violent conflict, ensued.

In the verses just preceding our text for this morning the big clash, the big confrontation between Elijah and Ahab takes place and the God of Israel, through the words and actions of Elijah prevails, to put it mildly.

Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, had been persecuting and killing the prophets of God for quite some time and Elijah had been on the run. Finally, our scripture says, God said to Elijah, now is the time. Come out and show Ahab and the people of the northern kingdom that I alone am the one true God. So Elijah met with Ahab and said, “have all of Israel assemble for me up on Mt. Carmel and bring along 450 of the prophets of your god, Baal and 400 of the prophets of Jezebel’s god, Asherah and let’s just see what happens.”

What happened was that through a dramatic show of fire and rain and the sword all those prophets were killed, a three year drought that had ravaged the land ended, Ahab was humiliated and, the story says, “the people fell on their faces and said, ‘the Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.’” (1 Kings 18:39)

Understandably I think, we recoil from the violence of this story, but we can clearly see the messages this story was meant to convey; , it proclaims the power and authority of God, the one true God, and it also affirms Elijah as a hero, a magnificent hero, in the faith. We see the greatness of Elijah in the eyes of God.

Which makes our text for this morning all the more poignant. The story continues, when Ahab went back to his palace following this catastrophic defeat of himself and everything he stood for, he told his wife Jezebel what had happened. She became furious. She had had enough of Elijah. She sent a message to him saying, “I will have you dead by tomorrow.” (1 Kings 19:3)

This is where we meet Elijah this morning.

Now that you have all this back story, let me read this passage one more time for you. I found this story touching me in different ways almost every time I read it this week. Thinking about my own journey in life and ministry. Thinking about other people’s journeys of ministry and faith. Like I said earlier, this passage just feels so human, so many threads of emotion weave through it. Listen to the text and see where it takes you just now. Close your eyes if you wish.

Reading from 1 Kings following Elijah's great triumph and the king and his wife's promise to take him down:

But he himself, Elijah went a day's journey into the *wilderness*, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He 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. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

Life is not easy, even for a prophet's prophet. Elijah has been to the mountain top, Mt. Carmel where he had wild, resounding success in his chosen calling, his profession. And he is on his way to Mt. Herob, also known as Sinai, the mountain where Moses received the law. There Elijah will meet God not in the earthquake, wind or fire but in sheer silence. (That is another famous Elijah story, the still, small voice of God)

But for now Elijah is in a deep valley on his journey. And he is going to be there for 40 days and 40 nights.

Biblical scholars that we all are, we know what '40' means in Biblical speak. The Hebrew people were in the wilderness for 40 years before they came to the promised land. Jesus was 40 days in the wilderness before he began his ministry. Forty anything means a serious time of reflection, wondering, considering, probably suffering for Elijah.

We get a glimpse here of Elijah's wilderness time. He sleeps a lot. He has suicidal thoughts. He is in a valley, literally and figuratively. Maybe Elijah is having second thoughts about his calling. Maybe he has a kind of PTSD after what he has been through with Ahab. Maybe he is frightened about where life is going. We do not know for sure. But clearly he is depressed.

In these few verses here we read also that Elijah is touched by an angel, who ministers to him in the form of food and drink for the journey. At first this is not enough. He eats and drinks and then goes back into sleep some more. But that

faithful angel persists. And, as we who have been ministered to by angels, some of whom are sharing the pews with you right now I am sure, with food and drink and companionship on our journeys, we know that angels offer so much more than simply satiation of our physical hunger and thirst. As the story says, Elijah regains strength for his journey.

A great prophet of God. Depression, fear, suicidal thoughts even. Wilderness time. An angel who comes in the midst of the wilderness. Food and drink and strength for the journey. It is a powerful passage. Because it is so human.

With this brief passage about the great Elijah, our Biblical story gives us a gift. Because it shows us the valley as well as the mountain tops. Not to say that all of our mountain tops and our valleys are as extreme as Elijah's, but for some of us sometimes they are.

What our verses for today remind us is that God comes to our valleys too, as surely as God shows up at our mountain tops. It is such a gentle, quiet passage - the angel offers food for the journey -twice- and Elijah is able to get up and continue on. Eventually he calls his successor, Elisha and God's ministry continues.

This is a gentle story of God's great love and compassion - and affirmation that there are no places where we can go physically or emotionally where God does not come to us.

Do you remember what Alice read for our first reading this morning? Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." For us as Christians, Christ is that presence of God. Christ takes that 'food and drink for the journey' image and brings it to life!

We are at different places on our journeys - sometimes we are Elijahs, sometimes we are the angel for another. May we be nourished by the food and drink that comes from God on our ways always.