

Bread from the Old Testament: Elisha

2 Kings 4:38-44 & John 6:1-15

July 28, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

Once every three years, in the cycle of the lectionary, we get what seems like decades on John 6, all about Jesus as the bread of life. It's actually only five weeks from John 6, and I don't know that the Holy Spirit and I have five weeks' worth of things to say about John 6 and the bread of life. I've usually avoided this stretch by instituting a sermon series of some kind. This year, I looked at the companion Old Testament readings for these five weeks and found what I think will work as a series. We'll soon find out. Each of the Old Testament readings offers a testimony about the God of Israelites being a "God who feeds," as a commentator put it this week.<sup>1</sup> The God who feeds doesn't just appear out of nowhere in Jesus, with the crowds of 4000 and 5000, like we read about in John. The God who feeds in Jesus Christ has been a God who feeds, throughout the history of God and the people.

Today's reading is from the book of Second Kings, and I suspect it's not one that you remember hearing often before. Remember that there are two prophets in this time frame of Israel's history, and they have similar names and do similar things. Elijah is the first one and appears before the other. He is remembered for ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire, among other things. We'll encounter him in a couple of weeks. Today's prophet is Elisha, who was Elijah's successor. This chapter, chapter 4, is a collection of five miracles attributed to Elisha.

The two miracles in today's reading both occur in a time of famine. The first one is actually not in the official lectionary reading, but I found it interesting reading, so I included it. The company of prophets appears frequently in this section of the Old Testament, and I imagine them to be sort of akin to a group of monks, but only sort of. They seem to live communally together at religious centers, but they are outwardly focused and travel about interacting with the people. In this famine, even the company of prophets has had a hard time finding enough to eat. They have gone out to gather wild plants to make a stew but don't know exactly what it is they're putting in that stew pot. While they are still eating the stew, it becomes evident that something in it is not something humans should be consuming. They cry out to Elisha, who throws some flour in the stew and

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, in Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave podcast 7/28/24.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQQKGAgcOC8&t=1350s>

thereby purifies it. The man of God, as Elisha is called, doesn't waste the pot of stew but miraculously makes it safe to eat.

The next miracle definitely echoes the gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes. Or, better said the other way around, the gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes would have echoed this story of Elisha feeding the 100 people. John's account, which includes the boy who offers his small lunch to the crowd especially lines up well with this passage. An unnamed man from a nearby town, a town named after the Canaanite god Baal, comes to offer his first fruits, as the Law required. He offers his first fruits not to the priest, but to the prophet Elisha. It is quite possible that the line between priest and prophet was not well defined at this point, and/or he may have been doing the best he could to follow the Law in a hostile environment.

The unnamed man brings twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain as his offering, ready to release it to whatever God might need it for. Elisha, as the man of God, the prophet, receives his offering and immediately decides to share it with the hungry company of prophets. We know they're hungry because of the famine in the previous bad pot of stew story. Elisha's servant is embarrassed, though, because there isn't near enough food to share with 100 people. Again, we hear Andrew saying to Jesus "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Running out of food was an inexcusable violation of the strong custom of hospitality in the Middle East. It still is, there and perhaps in your family, too. The servants, and disciples' objections are understandable and logical and realistic.

But Elisha says, "Give it to the people and let them eat." And why is he so confident in this command? Because "Thus says the Lord; 'They shall eat and have some left.'" In what feels and seems and objectively *is* scarcity—there simply isn't enough food for 100 people—God determines that there is not just enough but more than enough. This is a God who feeds. The man's offering is multiplied, and everyone is fed, and there are leftovers. God provides, even more than we need.

One of my friends is a Lutheran pastor, and week before last, the Lutherans had a youth gathering in New Orleans, 16,000 youth and their adult sponsors. One day, they all went out into New Orleans and did mission projects. The idea of setting all of that up makes me want to run away from home, but it had a huge impact on the youth as well as on the community. My friend the Lutheran pastor is at a church in the outskirts of New Orleans, and she was responsible for receiving one of the groups of youth. They were to work in a neighborhood near

her church. A nearby Missionary Baptist church had given them permission to use their parking lot and restrooms. Which is a lovely, hospitable thing to do, especially for youth from Minnesota in the midst of a New Orleans summer.

As the day wore on and got hotter, more and more youth migrated to sit in the Missionary Baptist church's air conditioning. The people at the church looked at these young people and said to themselves, "They look hungry. Let's feed them." They had some food at the church, sandwich fixings, because they provide meals to their neighbors once a week. In what is an astonishing move to me, they then said among themselves, "Let's fix these kids sandwiches with our feeding ministry's food." As far as I heard the story, there was no argument, like, if we make sandwiches for these kids, how are we going to replace the food for our neighbors? I would definitely have been making that argument. The kids weren't going to go hungry. There were plans in place for their lunch. But these church people, looking at a fellowship hall of hungry teenagers, made what was to them a natural decision. "Give the food to the people and let them eat."

When we trust in the God who feeds, the God who provides, the God who promises abundance and then some left over, then we can release our fears of scarcity and not enough. We can trust God to provide whatever it is that we need—food or energy or hope or anything else that seems in short supply. We can trust God to restore what it is that we use up as we give to our neighbors. Elisha and Jesus and the Missionary Baptist Church friends can testify to that. Let's trust their word, and trust the word of the Lord who provided for them and for us.