

Bread from the Old Testament: Elijah

1 Kings 19:4-8

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First Presbyterian, Luling

We return to our series of Old Testament passages that accompany the long chapter of John 6, where Jesus feeds the 5000 and proclaims that he is the bread of life. We first explored a fairly obscure story of the prophet Elisha feeding 100 men from the company of prophets during a famine, with only a few barley loaves and some grain. Out of what the others thought was insufficient, God creates abundance. Last week we followed John's story by remembering back to the story of God providing manna in the wilderness to the newly liberated Israelites. God gives them each day their daily bread, providing what they need in the amount that they need it. This week's passage takes place between the other two, and involves another Old Testament prophet with a similar name.

This one is Elijah. And we're popping in on the middle of his story. He has just had a big spectacle of a showdown with the prophets of the Canaanite god, in which he proves that his God is more powerful, and then he kills them all, 450 of them. Word gets back to Queen Jezebel that this Elijah person has embarrassed and then killed the prophets that serve her and her god, and she is both displeased and has the power to do something about it. She sends a messenger to Elijah, threatening that she will end his life in the next 24 hours.

Elijah has a healthy sense of self-preservation, so he flees to the wilderness. A day's journey into the wilderness, beyond Queen Jezebel's 24 hour time limit. Beyond Queen Jezebel's reach, out of her territory. He's not exactly out of danger, because the wilderness itself is dangerous. But he seems to be out of immediate danger from Jezebel. The wilderness is dangerous, yes. But the wilderness is also a place to encounter God, up close and personal.

Moses encountered God in the wilderness, at the burning bush, and then at Mount Sinai to receive the Law. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years and received God's provision in the manna every day, and reassurance of God's presence. We know that Jesus will journey into the wilderness after his baptism and have an intense encounter both with the temptations of the devil and the presence of the Spirit.

The wilderness is not an accidental setting for this story, and it's not an accident that Elijah chooses to go there for refuge. He's just had this great victory, but doing God's work hasn't been exactly what he thought, it seems. Perhaps the

450 lives that he took are weighing on him. I kind of hope they would be. His “reward” for doing what God commanded is that the queen is out to kill him, which doesn’t seem exactly like a reward, to say the least. Whatever the reason for his despair, we read that he sat down under a lonely tree and prays that God would let him die. We know the value of shade, and Elijah has chosen the most comfortable place he can find for this. Then he goes to sleep, for how long we don’t know.

An angel enters the scene, our translation says, but the literal word is messenger, the same word that describes the messenger that brings the death threat from Jezebel. So when this messenger wakes up Elijah, it’s possible that he thought his end really had come. But instead this messenger brings him food. A cake or bread baked on a stone and a jar of water. The absolute simplest of food, bread and water. Elijah eats this meal and falls back asleep. I wonder if this sleep was more restful, having had his body’s needs taken care of and feeling not quite so alone.

The messenger, this time identified specifically as coming from the Lord, so definitely an angel, wakes Elijah a second time, and tells him to eat again. This time the angel adds, “Otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” The angel knows what is coming. Elijah does not.

But Elijah trusts the angel of the Lord and gets up and eats and drinks. And then, like Moses and the Israelites before him and like Jesus the Messiah after him, he goes out in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. The strength of that bread from the angel carries him throughout those days. He ends up at Mount Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai, where Moses had received the Law directly from God. There he encounters God in a direct conversation, and sees the Lord pass by not in a great wind, nor in an earthquake, but in the silence. He does not ask that he might die, as he first had when he laid down under the tree, but he describes all he has done on God’s behalf. Among other instructions, God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor, the same Elisha that will feed the 100.

I want to go back to the moment when the angel feeds him again and says “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” The angel of the Lord knows what will come, knows the forty days and forty nights will be difficult. And the angel of the Lord gives Elijah what he will need for that future that he cannot see yet. There is no promise that the future journey will be easy or smooth or pleasant. The angel actually makes it sound treacherous and difficult. But Elijah

will have what he needs, and the future journey will not be too much. He will be able to complete that journey.

As I've been pondering this sermon this week, I've been thinking about ways that God prepares us for what our futures will bring, even if we aren't aware of it at the time. Maybe it's a function of getting older and having more pieces to put together in the puzzle of my life, or maybe it's those hindsight glasses giving me clearer vision, but I can definitely see ways that God has prepared me and provided me things I will need in a future I could not even imagine.

Here's an example of two things early in my childhood that I think prepared me for a future 30 years yet to come. First, when we were little, in elementary school, my grandmother worked as a teacher's aide for several years at an elementary school near her home. The classroom where she worked was a special ed classroom, and her students had various kinds of disabilities. Every once in a while, when we had a school holiday but she didn't, we would go to spend the day in her classroom. The students that made a big impression on me were the ones with noticeable, significant physical disabilities. Many of them used wheelchairs or tiny walkers. Some of them were missing limbs. These were kids my age, dealing with things that I never had even seen before. She loved those kids and worked with them to learn and live up to their full capabilities. She talked about them often, and we went often enough, that seeing kids with disabilities began to seem normal to me.

Another piece of this puzzle was a woman who was part of our distant extended family. She was the sister-in-law of one of my great uncles, my grandmother's brother. It's a bit more complicated than that, but that's the easiest way to explain it. His wife's sister. I don't know that she ever had any kind of formal diagnosis, but she had both physical and cognitive disabilities. She was hard to understand when she talked, and she was always smiling and kind. The family took care of her and brought her to gatherings. She was born in 1925, so by the time I knew her she was in her 60s.

Those two experiences, each of which were repeated over and over, were getting me ready for a journey that I couldn't have even imagined or predicted. God was getting me ready to be the parent I would need to be. Giving me experiences and skills and role models to draw on. Without that preparation, would the journey have been too much for me? I don't know, but I do know how often I've thought of those kids in my grandmother's classroom and that relative at family gatherings.

Elijah needed the strength of that food and water and rest. Those are always good things to have with us: food and water and rest. Elijah needed too the assurance that God had not abandoned him in the wilderness. God's presence and strength accompanied him along his future journey. We need the same, the assurance that God's presence and strength accompany us. And they do.

Two quotations have also been filtering through my thoughts this week. Both of these quotes are in the context of dying and the future being in heaven, in the full presence of God. The first is from perhaps an unlikely source, Charles Dickens. It's from "A Tale of Two Cities." I read it last in freshman English class, but this quote has stuck with me, along with its opening line. At the very end of the book, as the main character is preparing to be put to death, a sacrifice he is making, he says this: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known." He's seeing his sacrificial death as redeeming of his somewhat wasteful life. And he faces death in the confidence that what lies ahead is better. That he is prepared and ready to go into his future journey.

The other is from C.S. Lewis, who was most definitely considering a Christian hope of eternal life. In a letter, he writes "Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave it with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind."

Ultimately, God is giving us what we need for the journey. Whatever the future brings, wherever the journey will take us, whatever our wilderness will look like, we will have what we need and we will not be alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.