

lec 19, Yr B-August 11, 2024  
Psalm 34:1-8; 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2;  
John 6:35, 41-51  
St Paul Newark-Barbara Melosh

For five Sundays during the summer of this year's lectionary, we leave our featured gospel Mark for readings from John, from what is called "the bread of life" discourse. In that gospel and in other readings and psalms, we have stories of miraculous feeding, —manna in the wilderness, to feed the Israelites on their journey, and five loaves multiplied to feed a crowd of five thousand.

In 1 Kings today we have another one, in a quiet drama where one man is fed, a meal that restores his life.

Elijah is a deeply discouraged man at the start of it, so worn out and downhearted he's ready to lie down and die. In this gentle story, God sends an angel with a hotcake and a jar of cold water, served with a little firm encouragement: "Get up and eat." With the touch of an angel, a simple meal, and that simple instruction, God gives new strength and energy to a man who was ready to give up.

What we don't hear in this story is what happened to Elijah, to bring him to this place—alone in the wilderness; sitting under a lone broom tree and begging to die. What kind of thing brings a person so low in their life that they long for death like a long cool drink of water on a hot day, or a deep dreamless sleep after too many long weary nights? Well, there are many answers to that and maybe finally there is no answer, no way to explain what it is that brings some people to that desolate place.

Here's the strange thing about Elijah's story. He is a man who has been defeated by his own spectacular success. Here's the back story--the drama, spectacle, and violence that come before the silence and despair of Elijah in the desert.

Elijah is a prophet in Israel at a time when the people of God have been distracted by idols and lies. It's a time of terrible drought, and in times like this, people long for the God who will save them from suffering and grant them prosperity. The prophets of that God never lose their power to attract.

That gospel is wildly popular in our own day—you can hear it for yourself if you listen to Joel Osteen, pastor of one of the biggest congregations in America, whose winning smile and success stories draw 45,000 people a week—and millions more in the TV audience. It's called the prosperity gospel. That pastor and others like him promise that if you turn to the God they proclaim, he'll make you rich.

In Elijah's day, the people of God often turned to Baal, the storm god, who brought rain and made the desert fertile. Elijah, God's prophet, kept trying to call people back to the God of the covenant. That made him an enemy of the state, because Queen Jezebel, ruler of Israel, worshiped Baal, and supported an army of prophets who proclaimed the storm god.

So Elijah decides to confront the prophets of Baal, in a big public showdown. He proposes a test, with a big audience gathered around to witness it. They set up two altars and lay fires on them, with oxen prepared for sacrifice. He challenges the prophets of Baal to a prayer duel—one against 450 of them—to see who can call down God's fire to ignite the wood.

Baal's prophets go first. They pray all morning and into the afternoon. Nothing. Elijah taunts them, "Call a little louder!" Still nothing.

Then Elijah steps up, throws water all over his altar, and digs a trench around it and fills that with water—just to make it more of a challenge. He calls on God to make God's power known: "...reveal to this people that you are God, the true God." And immediately the altar ignites, a fire burning so hot that the offering, the woods, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench are all consumed.

Then he cries to the people watching, "Go get the prophets of Baal!" and the crowd pursues them, killing all of them.

When Jezebel learns this, she is furious, and places a death sentence on his head. It's an old story, the way violence calls forth more violence; the world has seen that too many times, in attacks of Iran and Lebanon and Israel's counter attacks; in revenge killings in Bangladesh. Violence in our own homes and hearts; in bitterness and anger; in words that wound, or unspoken anger festering inside.

The bible is full of anger, our own anger and God's anger. "Be angry," the writer of Ephesians counsels, surprisingly, in a way, in this advice about living together peacefully; but consistent with the bible's realism about human life. And more than that, anger is sometimes righteous, even holy, when it is a response to injustice, done in defense of life. God's prophets were all angry men.

Righteous anger can be a powerful engine of justice, but it is dangerous too, because we are not God. So the counsel of Ephesians is "be angry but do not sin."

Elijah has humiliated and killed his enemies, and now he is a fugitive, on the run again. Exhausted, probably terrified, he's running on empty and ready to give it up for good.

But God isn't done with him. An angel wakes him up, and sets a hot cake and a jar of water next to him. It's room service, right there in the wilderness! "Get up and eat," the angel says to him.

Elijah eats and drinks, and then he goes back to sleep.

The angel comes with another wake-up call, and more food.

It's God response to a discouraged prophet. No lectures, no scolding, no pep talks, no strategy sessions—just food for the journey, and encouragement to eat and drink. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

With the hot cake and water, Elijah is refreshed. A simple meal, bringing the miracle of new life. A meal that keeps him going for forty days and forty nights. A meal that returns him to who he is meant to be; changes him from a discouraged prophet to a pilgrim. He gets up again, and travels through the wilderness to a holy place—to Mount Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai, where Moses met God.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus says. It's a promise that we will be fed—that we'll get what we need, day by day. Eat this bread, so the journey won't be too much for you.

It's a promise that the bread we eat will nourish us for more than that day. Eat this bread, and never be hungry.

Bread from heaven. It's manna in the wilderness, a hot cake delivered by an angel in the desert. It's a baby in a manger, born in Bethlehem—which means “house of bread”—to be bread to the world. The bread of life—it's the body of Christ, broken for you on the cross. The bread of life, given for you, for the life of the world.

So come with open hands, eat this bread.