

Bread for the Journey

I Kings 19:1-9 (1-18)

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 4) 2020

Iron Wheel Baptist Church parking lot

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*You are not required to complete your work, but you are not at liberty to quit it.*

*- The Talmud*

Elijah was on the run. He was exhausted and he was scared. To echo Fannie Lou Hamer, he was sick and tired of being sick and tired, but he knew he couldn't stop now.

Remember in the chapter just before in I Kings, Elijah had won a tremendous and dramatic victory over Queen Jezebel and King Ahab, and their false gods and false preachers, in a showdown at Mount Carmel. By the power of the Living God, he showed their gods to be false and shallow and powerless. By the power of the Living God, he showed that Jezebel and Ahab were all about themselves and their own power. At the same time, he earned their wrath. For exposing their lying ways and idolatrous lives, Jezebel and Ahab determined to get Elijah no matter what. So, she unleashed her SWAT teams, her bloodhounds, and her helicopters to find Elijah and kill him.

Verse 3 says of Elijah, "He was afraid. He got up and fled for his life." He didn't have time to prepare. He just hit the backdoor and ran. He could hear the dogs barking. He could even smell some of the teargas the SWAT teams used when they kicked in his door in the middle of the night. Elijah was tired of doors

getting kicked in the during the middle of the night. He was tired of being careful of where he drove and how he drove, of where he walked and how he walked, where he carried his I.D., and what he did with his hands. He was tired of being pulled over; he was tired of making sure there were some parts of town that he had better stay away from. He was sick and tired, and he was sick and tired of being sick and tired. So, he ran.

The Bible says he got to Beersheba. When he got there, he knew he was going to be safe from Jezebel's SWAT teams. Beersheba was the jumping off place to the wilderness. Beyond Beersheba, Jezebel and Ahab had no power. Beyond Beersheba there was no more Jezebel supremacy and Ahab privilege. There was no more Jezebel Jim Crow. Beyond Beersheba... there was only the Living God.

Elijah headed for the wilderness. It was the same wilderness he had been in back in chapter 17 when God called him to be a prophet. It was the same wilderness Moses and the people of God had wandered for forty years. And it would be in this same wilderness centuries later, where Jesus would be tempted by the Devil.

Remember that the wilderness in the Bible is never just the wilderness. The wilderness is where everything we are accustomed to, and everything we have relied upon is stripped away. Sometimes the wilderness is the waiting room of a hospital and we hear the dreaded words, "cancer." Or perhaps it is being told by your supervisor at work, "We no longer need your services." Or for white folks, it might mean being woke that living in Jezebel and Ahab's system has meant White privilege and White supremacy and the wilderness is the beginning of being freed

from all that. For White folks, that might be scary and intimidating at first. For folks like Elijah, the wilderness sounds like good news. It sounds like relief. Freedom. The wilderness is wherever we find ourselves with nothing... except the Living God.

So, Elijah heads for the wilderness. He runs until he can't run anymore. Exhausted and in despair, he collapses under a little shade tree and falls to sleep. Maybe this was the first good sleep he's had. This is the first time he didn't have to sleep with one eye open and an ear cocked listening for barking dogs and police loudspeakers. He was so tired, and he fell asleep. Finally, he got some rest.

After resting, he was awakened by an angel, who provided him with some freshly baked bread and some fresh water. "Get up and eat," the angel said. Elijah ate and drank, then he lay back down and went to sleep some more. Eventually, the angel woke him again, saying, "Get up and eat some more. Otherwise, the journey will be too long and too hard, and you won't make it" (v.7).

Back in the mid-1980's, when I was in Atlanta, GA working with homeless people, I was in a meeting in which C.T. Vivian, long-time friend and associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and who just passed away this past July 17. Well, Dr. Vivian walked into this meeting wearing a suit and carrying a big old Bible. Someone asked Dr. Vivian if he would lead us in prayer and he did. He got out of his folding chair and knelt in front of it laying that big old Bible in the seat. And he started praying. He prayed and he prayed. And then he prayed some more, building in momentum and power as he prayed. Finally, he shouted to God, "O God, the journey is long, and the battle is hard! We won't make it without you."

C.T. Vivian knew what it took to make it. He knew what it took to survive. He knew that living the beloved community, the kingdom of God, would take our entire lifetime and he knew that we would be tempted to give up and give in to despair. Dr. Vivian knew that God would not give up on us even though we would be tempted to give up on God. What C.T. Vivian knew, is what the angel of God is teaching Elijah. God will not give up on us.

The Bible says Elijah got up and ate and drank some more, “then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God” (v.8). You know where Mt. Horeb is, don’t you? Mt. Horeb also is known by another name: Mt. Sinai. It is the same mountain, where Moses was met by the Living God and given the Ten Commandments.

Elijah flees to the wilderness – where he is safe and can rely on the strength and nourishment of God. And he makes a beeline for where he knows God is. He goes to Sinai, to Horeb.

Where do you go to feel safe? Where do you go to find God, again? Where do you go to be nourished by God?

For most of us, it’s church. Maybe it’s a big crowd or maybe two or three gathered in Jesus’ name, but we come together – as best we can – to find God again. And being with God, we are fed by God. And sometimes, like in the New Testament, God feeds us on the way.

Remember that in the New Testament, in the book of Acts, the earliest name for the disciples of Jesus, the church, was “People of the Way.” If you read the

Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John you will note that Jesus and his disciples are always on the way to somewhere. The disciples often seem to be out of breath trying to keep up with Jesus. He came along and said, “Drop all you have and come follow me.” And they did.

I’m convinced that the Christian life is an adventurous journey, in great part because it is learning how to trust God while learning to quit trusting old Ahab and Jezebel.

But that means the journey is dangerous. Ahabs and Jezebels do not take kindly to a group, even a small one, of ordinary people breaking loose, letting go of the securities of deathly ways, and moving out with Jesus in ways of Life. They don’t like people like Elijah who stand against them and their ways.

It also means that one of the most important virtues that we learn to practice is perseverance. We are on this adventurous journey over the long haul. Not only are there dangers but there are disappointments and setbacks along the way. And we learn how to keep going; how to not give up. We’re not running a sprint; we’re running a marathon. This life we’re called to live takes a tenacity of spirit that won’t give up.

Elijah found God on the mountaintop. Not in a big, loud way but listening to the still, small voice, Elijah was met by God and discovered: (1) He was not alone. (2) God was sending him back to it. (3) Get some help.

This morning, God feeds so we will not give up. God feeds us so we will get up and go back to the battle. The journey is long, and the battle is hard, as C.T. Vivian said. And we are to go back to it.

Harriet Tubman is known to us as the great Moses of the days of slavery. After escaping slavery, herself, she made repeated trips rescuing many other slaves and leading them to safety, sometimes as far north as Canada.

Harriet was also a great cook, and an expert in foods that grew wild in the woods. Harriet knew how to lead people out of slavery, usually escaping in the night, and while running through the woods, she knew which berries to grab and eat while running and which ones to leave alone. She knew to grab sassafras leaves to suck on while running and black cherries or paw paws to grab. She also knew to make up a batch of hardtack biscuits or cornbread and take it with you.

Along the Underground Railroad, she knew who she could count on to feed them and who would hide food for them out in a hollow tree.

Harriet Tubman knew what it took to keep going and she knew how God nourishes us so we won't give up.

Today, the Living God feeds us so we might keep going. This is our bread for the journey. Though we wish we could be together in person, right now, we receive the Lord's nourishment in our cars.

The writer of Hebrews said, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." (Hebr. 12:1-2).

The journey may be long, but it is rarely boring. These days it is hard, and it is full of transitions, confusion, many disappointments, and sometimes grief. But all along the way God's grace sustains us, nourishes us, and keeps us going – as we travel toward a promised future where everyone is sustained and nourished and redeemed.

Amen.