

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead New York
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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 14B– August 8, 2021
I Kings 19:4-8 , Psalm 34:1-8, Ephesians 4:25-34, John 6:35, 41-51

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN!

We find ourselves feeling like veterans of the COVID pandemic, having lived with it in our communities for seventeen months now. But we've learned in the last several weeks that much of what we know about the virus and how to protect ourselves from it is no longer useful because it has been modified into several variants that appear to be more infectious and more potent than the original was. People who thought themselves protected by their youth and good health have been brought down by this invisible enemy, some having lost their lives.

So you might feel something like Elijah was in the first lesson we heard today. He didn't have a virus to deal with, just Queen Jezebel (who some people might think of as virulent). He had come to Israel, the Northern Kingdom, to proclaim the Word of the Lord to King Ahab. That leader had married Jezebel, a Canaanite woman and a worshipper of Baal, and he had abandoned his God and led his people to do the same. When Elijah challenged Ahab, the latter set up a contest between Elijah and four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. Whichever God's prophets won the contest would be King Ahab's God. The contest was the following. Two bulls were brought before Ahab, Elijah, the prophets of Baal and all the people of Israel. The sacrifices were cut in pieces and placed on wood. The prophets of Baal were to call on Baal to send fire to burn the sacrifices. They called all morning, but no fire appeared. They called the rest of the day, but no fire appeared.

Now, there had been a drought in Israel when Elijah arrived, so everything was dry. When it was Elijah's turn to call YHWH, he first poured water on the sacrifice and wood, and embraced himself around the altar. He did this several times. Then Elijah called on God to send fire and all was burned up: the bull, the wood, and the water. Clearly, YHWH was the more powerful God.

Then Elijah killed the prophets of Baal and told Ahab to eat and drink so that he would be strong and ready for whatever would happen next. Then a pouring rainstorm hit Israel and the drought was over. Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done, and she swore that she would kill Elijah within the next twenty-four hours. Elijah feared for his life and fled into the desert to hide. He was exhausted. He had been obedient to God, and God's supreme authority had been demonstrated to King Ahab and the people of Israel. But now he was a marked man.

This is when we came upon Elijah on our first lesson today. What is his reaction? He just wants to die because he is the last prophet of YHWH, he is so tired from delivering God's message, and he has lost hope for his future.

Although we're not prophets, we also are tired of doing what we have been told is right in order

to combat COVID. We've worn masks. Most of us in New York State have been fully vaccinated. We've isolated ourselves to the extent possible. We've washed our hands, over and over and over again. Our leaders told us that there was hope for a return to some semblance of a normal life. But now we're hearing that even fully vaccinated people are getting this new variant of the virus. And we're back to masks and isolating ourselves whenever possible. All the while, we're working out ways to return to in-person worship, which we have missed for more than a year.

We too are tired. Some people may have lost hope. But it is no coincidence that we are hearing this message today. God is speaking to us to give us hope and courage and patience. We can seek the peace and quiet that Elijah found in the desert when we isolate. We can rest in our solitariness or family groups to regain our strength and hope to continue to fight COVID. We will eat and drink to restore our strength and energy so that we can continue to eat the virus. Because God is not yet done with us. And we're not done opposing the virus.

In fact, God continues to provide for us as God has provided for his people for all time. God provided for Adam and Eve, even after they disobeyed and were sent out of the garden; Noah and his family were provided for, along with all the known animals of that day on the ark; Abraham and Sarah were provided for when their family faced starvation during the famine by finding a new home in well-provisioned Egypt; Joseph was provided for when he was given authority and the way to help his family; the people of Israel were provided for after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, with manna and quail and water in the wilderness; and God's chosen people were provided for generation after generation, even when they departed from their covenant with YHWH God. The work of the prophets and the armies of Israel's and Judah's enemy nations brought the attention of the people back to God, again and again. And God provided for them, over and over again.

And now God provides for us again through the life, public ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. And that provision for us is Jesus himself, the Bread of Life.

Jesus is the bread of life, he tells us through the gospel of John, several times (6:35, 48). Then, "I am the bread that came down from heaven" follows (6:41); and "I am the bread that comes down from heaven so the people who eat it will not die." (6:50.) And "I am the living bread that came down from heaven, so that whoever eats it will live forever." (6:51.) And finally, he says, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (6:51).

While today we are not worshipping in person, we receive Jesus in word and faith, while we wait to receive him in Holy Communion. Even while we work on how to come together in worship, we receive him in our relationship with him, individually and as a community. And we receive him in our relationships with other believers.

So, hear the words of Paul's to keep us hopeful and connected to God in Father, Son, and Spirit, and committed to living with one another through this time when we wait for whatever will come next:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for

we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4:25-27, 29-5:2.

Remember every day that Jesus is the Bread of Life, and repeat this encouragement from Paul. Every day.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen