

August 9, 2015

“Wonder Bread”

[Ordinary 19B: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]

I Kings 19.1-10

John 6.48-51

Our world and our times are full of stories like Elijah’s—stories of struggle for supremacy between religious and ethnic groups, stories full of horrifying violence, stories with leaders who are heroic patriots to one side and bloodthirsty terrorists to the other. Elijah could be one of these depending on whose side we take. Elijah is a prophet of God, of Israel and its people. But Israel’s God, Yahweh, is a newcomer, a threat to the old gods and to the survival of the native Canaanite peoples of the land Israel conquered.

When King Ahab makes Jezebel from Sidon his queen, she restores the worship of Baal. The Israelites then forsake God’s covenant, tear down Yahweh’s altars and put God’s prophets to the sword. Elijah is called to overthrow Baal worship and restore God’s covenant with Israel. He’s zealous in his duty and with the defeat of the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel he has a huge triumph. But his slaughter of 450 of their prophets backfires. Led by Queen Jezebel, who sees Elijah as the main threat to her religion and power, the gods and priests of Baal rise up again and Jezebel initiates a campaign to destroy the “new” faith, persecute the prophets of God and, especially, eliminate Elijah.

Elijah has seen the prophets and priests of Yahweh slaughtered and the people turning back to the gods of the land prior to Israel’s conquest. Of the prophets, only Elijah is left and he cries out, “they seek to take my life.” So he flees. It’s as if nothing had happened on Mt. Carmel. Ahab and Jezebel remain in power, she seeks his life and has sworn an oath to get him. Afraid, desperate and in despair, Elijah flees into the desert.

When we hear the passage read today, a sojourn in the desert may seem like a safe and peaceful interlude, but if Elijah is feeling suicidal here it’s for good reason. The desert is not a place of solitude, meditation, or prayer, but for him a

wilderness of loneliness, hopelessness and despair. Elijah leaves his servant and goes on alone, because he is alone. A day's journey into the wilderness, he sits down under the shade of a tree and prays for death. His despair has become so deep he no longer wants to live. He cries, "Enough, O Lord! I'm a complete failure, take my life," and seeks death.

Elijah's despair has a modern ring to it. It's the kind of despair that we all feel when the work we've been called to do, whether our job, in church or society, goes terminally wrong. When it no longer matters what we do, nothing seems to go right. It's a situation that reminds me of the title of a book by the late Richard Fariña, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, 1966.

It's a time many of us have experienced when we've been ready to give it up, especially in our 20s or 30s . . . or 40s or 50s or 60s . . . There's no age cut-off. We've lost a job, flunked out of school, been rejected by the one we love, or some combination of these. We're down, depressed and in despair. In my generation it was taking a pint of whiskey to the drive-in, ordering a large Coke and sitting there alone trying to get so numb we could feel nothing. In later generations it's been drugs. But in both cases there's an unconscious, unspoken wish to die. To be taken in an auto accident on the way home, wherever home is, or to O.D. and just become another statistic . . . 'cause who would care? Yet by God's grace, like Elijah, many of us survived.

Yet whatever else he is, Elijah is a prophet. So even in the depths of despair, he acknowledges that he belongs to God. He doesn't contemplate suicide. He can not take his life for his life is not his own, it belongs finally to Yahweh. His life belongs to God so he prays, "O Lord, take my life." Or in so many words, "take your life back, the one you gave me. Only you can reclaim it." Elijah then falls asleep. If he can't kill himself, at least he can sleep. If God won't take his life, he can at least sleep it away. Today we would say he has clinical depression, sleeping

his life away in order to escape it. Many of us have been there as well. But, of course, God has no intention of taking Elijah's life. Nor does Yahweh intend to let him sleep too long. If Elijah has given up hope, he has properly, whether he wishes it or not, given it up to God which is to give up hope to the One who does not allow hopelessness.

Elijah's despair is not the opposite of hope. It's rather the absence of hope. The etymology of the word despair makes that clear. It derives from the Latin *desperare*, with the prefix *de*, "without," plus *sperare*, "to hope." So it means, "to be without hope." The word desperate comes from the same root.

St. Thomas Aquinas defines "despair" as "ceasing to hope for a share in God's goodness" and he allows that while it's, strictly speaking, the most grievous of sins, it's still "from [one] point of view more dangerous than hating God or unbelief." For where "hope is given up, [we] rush headlong into sin." ¹

Following Aquinas' lead, when we speak about giving up hope, what do we mean? Giving implies a giver, something given and a receiver. To whom or to what do we give up hope? The answer "to no one, we just give it up," may seem both obvious and correct to us but it would make no sense to the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures. For them hope given up is hope given up to God. Because we belong to God who is inescapable. "Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asks. "Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea [think here of Jonah], even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." (Psalm 139.7-9)

God is present everywhere. Even in the depths of Hell, whether in despair or sin, Yahweh is present and hears the voice of those who cry out as well as the cry of the those give up hope. Even when the psalmist feels abandoned by God,

it's to Yahweh that he cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22.1) At his death Jesus shares this cry. Having asked God to let the cup of suffering and death pass from him on the night before his trial and death, and then accepting it he feels abandoned by Yahweh when he's accused, "convicted" and hung up on the cross to die. In his despair and bereft of hope, Jesus cries out to God, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (Matthew 27.46) Even Jesus despairs.

What occurs next for Elijah should be instructive for us. It's difficult to imagine God acting in a more motherly manner than here. Yahweh sends an angel who touches Elijah, makes him get up and eat the bread and water he brings for him. He eats but exhausted and still in despair falls right back to sleep. The angel returns and awakens Elijah once more, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Perhaps in depression and despair an expression of love and concern by someone sent by God, even unknowingly, can comfort and console us and give us hope again.

It's not the first time Elijah has received sustenance from God. His ministry is in a good part a tale of the divine care and feeding of a prophet. Indeed, Elijah's story begins in a time of drought and famine. But God sees that he always has enough water to drink and bread to eat. Yahweh feeds the prophet by the ravens at the Wadi Cherith. When the wadi dries up God sends Elijah to Zarephath where there is a well and a widow who'll share her small supply of flour and oil with him, a supply continually replenished by Yahweh until the drought and famine end (17.7-16).

But now it's "Get up and eat, or else the journey will be too much for you." Despite his despair Elijah eats and goes "in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God." This is obviously no ordinary bread, giving Elijah extraordinary strength, enough to survive forty days and nights. It

not only strengthens Elijah, it nourishes him and gives him hope. It opens his eyes and ears and dissipates the despair clouding his mind and heart so he's able to recognize God when Yahweh comes to him. This is no time to despair, God tells him, "I've got things for you to do.

This is no ordinary bread Yahweh sends to feed Elijah but bread that provides extraordinary strength, insight and courage. Likewise, it's not ordinary bread that God gives to feed us in Christ. In our gospel lesson today Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life," and "This is the bread that comes down from heaven." He goes on to say, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." What kind of bread is this?

Growing up in the Midwest in the 1950s the bread on the table was Wonder Bread. Bread for toast in the morning, bread for sandwiches at lunchtime, bread with the meal for dinner, it was always Wonder Bread! It was a pure white bread, first baked in Indianapolis, where I grew up, the first bread to be sold pre-sliced (hence the popular phrase, "the greatest thing since sliced bread"), but it was also fortified with vitamins and minerals, and was advertised as "Building Strong Bodies 8 Ways" and later "Building Strong Bodies 12 Ways."² It was only as an adult I realized it *had* to be fortified, because all the nutrients had been bleached out of it to make pure white bread. To their credit, Flowers Foods, the present-day bakers of Wonder Bread, now offers "Wonder 100% Whole Wheat Bread," and a variety of multi-grain breads.

This digression is a way to raise two questions, what kind of wonder bread did the angel give to Elijah? And what wonder is offered in the bread of life, come down from heaven, that enables us to live forever? Obviously, the bread Elijah receives and the bread offered us in Christ is not the Wonder Bread of my childhood and teenage years in Indianapolis.

One way to approach these questions is to go back to the “Bread of the Presence” in the Hebrew Scriptures. Strictly speaking, the Bread of the Presence refers to the twelve loaves placed weekly by the high priest in sanctuary of the Temple, separated only by a curtain from Yahweh’s immediate presence in the Holy of Holies. It was one of the rituals symbolizing God’s presence in the Temple. The week-old bread was later eaten by the priests when it was replaced on the next Sabbath.³

I suggest we expand the use of the term, Bread of the Presence, in two other, but related ways. One way is to symbolize God’s presence with Elijah in his despair by sending an angel with bread to comfort and feed him. Because it’s not simply the angel and the wonder bread provided, but the presence of God’s Spirit that revives and sustains Elijah and gives him hope. Elijah is enabled to go on to meet Yahweh at Mt. Horeb in the “sound sheer silence” and complete the work God has called him to do until Elisha comes to succeed him. The wonder of this bread is the nourishing and empowering presence of Yahweh. God’s presence.

The other way is when Jesus explains that he is the living bread come down from heaven, a wonder bread indeed. This bread is more extraordinary than the manna eaten in the wilderness, the Bread of the Presence in the Temple and even more extraordinary than the bread served to Elijah. For while the manna and the bread are eaten the Israelites and the priests eventually die and Elijah is taken up. On the contrary, whoever eats the bread Jesus provides “will live for ever.” When Jesus speaks of eternal life or of living forever in John’s gospel, he’s not talking of “pie in the sky by and by.” He tells of his presence with us now, in faith, that is, God’s presence among us, with us, here and now, now and forever. Jesus, the bread of life, brings us the eternal life we share with him now or, we could say, the companionship and presence of God that is with us now and always in Jesus Christ.

When we bring the despair and hopelessness of our lives to Jesus, to his

living presence with us in the Spirit, we receive strength and nourishment, courage and hope. Like the angel of God with Elijah, Jesus opens our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds so we're able to recognize God when the Spirit, whether in the form of an angel, a loving companion, a sympathetic friend or just a concerned stranger comes to us with a sustaining word of hope. More than that, God becomes present to us in Christ and comes to us as Yahweh comes to Elijah with work to do. This is no time to despair, God tells us, "I've got things for you to do." It's with this hope, even if we're unsure of our calling, that Yahweh comes to us to nourish us—spiritually for certain and materially when necessary—because there is work to do.

What is eternal life? Our present in Christ and our future with God. This is the hope that feeds us, this is the hope we can feast on. For Immanuel, God with us—our living bread, our bread of heaven, our wonder bread—is with us now and forever. Let's get to work!

AMEN!

¹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 20, 3.

²Wonder Bread ©, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wonder_Bread.

³L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Bread of Presence," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, A-C, Volume 1, 499-500. Paul V. M. Flesher, "Bread of the Presence," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 1, A-C, 780-781.