

August 8th, 2021

Year B; 11th Pentecost

1 Kings 19: 4-8

Psalm 34: 1-8

John 6: 35, 41-51

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

1 Kings 19:4-8

Elijah went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Our Old Testament lesson always reminds me of 2 kindergarteners I met in my last year at St. Christopher’s, and I can’t resist taking a minute to telling you about them.

These two 5-year-olds were very sweet, they were brothers, and they were identical twins named, Elijah and Elisha. It was almost impossible to tell them apart, and with their names, almost impossible to call them by the correct name! They were very gentle boys and it had not occurred to them, yet, to play tricks on adults, switching places.....but I imagine they got there! Their parents were from Ghana in west Africa, and were devout Christians. All their children had Biblical names, but none so memorable as the twins’, honoring the prophet Elijah and his disciple Elisha.

Now we can turn to 1 King’s where we encounter the prophet Elijah, considered among the greatest of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible.

At the Transfiguration, when Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to the mountaintop, and Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, appearing in gleaming

white robes, Jesus is in conversation with Moses, and Elijah. Elijah is that great among the prophets!

But today we find Elijah at a very low and frightening point in his life. He has been in battle with the corrupt king of Israel, King Ahab and his Queen, Jezebel. King Ahab has turned from the God of the Israelites and is worshipping, and commanding all to worship, Baal.

By the time we join the story, the worship of Baal has grown and there are many powerful prophets preaching devotion to Baal.

Elijah finally battles these prophets and kills them all. He has defeated this false god and his prophets, but King Ahab, and even more Queen Jezebel are furious, as the death of the prophets lessens their power.

And so, Jezebel sends a chilling message to Elijah, saying:

“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them (the prophets of Baal killed) by this time tomorrow.”

And Elijah, who battled many and won, is afraid. And he runs, he flees into the wilderness, and here we join him today.

Elijah had a servant traveling with him, but he leaves the servant behind, before he enters the wilderness.

He sits down in the desert, finding only a solitary broom tree to lean on, and he asks God to take him, he asks, to die.

Elijah feels that he has failed, he is in despair that he has not done enough, and he is afraid that Jezebel, with her fierce message, will inevitably find him and have him killed, perhaps as soon as she vowed, tomorrow.

Elijah is also exhausted and depleted. Perhaps we can relate to Elijah; we might not have been battling the false prophets of Baal in our daily work, but still.....there are days when, whether we are retired or working, our encounters, our families, our bosses, our co-workers.....leave us ready to lie down under a

broom tree too.

And we too might be able to relate to Elijah telling God to take his life, that he is done, he is ready to die.

Feeling defeated, feeling depleted, having thoughts of suicide are far more common experiences than we still are comfortable talking openly about in our society today.

But in my own life, and in my ministry, when we speak up and name our feelings and experiences, we receive a flood of folks who have experienced the same thing. When we say:

“I have dealt with suicidal thoughts” or we name that a death was a suicide, and bring compassion to that tragedy, not condemnation, we have opened the door so that others can speak the truth too.

We open the door so others can feel less alone, and we open the door for healing for ourselves and others.

After Elijah tells God to take away his life, he falls asleep under that solitary broom tree. We can picture Elijah so alone, darkness falling over the vast and inhospitable wilderness all around him, asleep on the sand with his head on his arm, unable to stay awake, despite his fear.

Of course, he falls asleep, because he is exhausted. He has been battling, followed by running, in panic and fear, and Elijah is worn out. He has tried and tried to do what was asked of him, tried and tried to do what is right, and he can't do anymore. Likely we can all relate to that place.

And we all need to know that in our own exhaustion, in our despair, in our own times of feeling suicidal, feeling we can't go on, God is still there.

For Elijah, God's presence is known in the arrival of quite a bossy, no nonsense angel, who says:

“Get up and eat.”

Sometimes we need such angels, when we forget to eat, when our despair sends us back to bed.

God bless the angels among us who show up with good hot cake baked on stones, or at least fresh bread and cheese, or a lasagna, or a pie.

Get up and eat.

And then Elijah is back to bed, back to his arm as his pillow and the sand under him.

He is so tired.

He sleeps and sleeps and then the bossy angel is back again, saying again:

“Get up and eat.” But adding this time: “...otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Eat because you are still here, your journey goes on, God is with you.

And Elijah then goes 40 days and nights on the strength of that food. Elijah is up and moving again, called by God, not to do everything, but simply to go to Horeb, the mount of God.

Life can be so hard, even when no one else can see it but us. We try to keep up appearances, say fine, when asked how we are, but still, life can feel like it did for Elijah, too much.

We need cakes and water from bossy angels, we need the cake, the bread at this altar, the bread of life.

“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Eat because you are still here, your journey goes on, God is with you.

Amen.