

11th Sunday after Pentecost 8 August 2021

1 Kings 19:4-8 / Psalm 34:1-8 / Ephesians 4:25-5:2 / John 6:35, 41-51

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Some of my favorite Bible stories are the ones where a lot happens – the action stories, the “I can’t wait to see what happens next” stories. Today, we’re at our third week of the Bread stories, going from the feeding of the five thousand, to the manna in the wilderness and Jesus saying for the first time that he is the Bread of Life, up to today.

We begin right where we left off last week, at the same audacious statement of who Jesus is. But before we get to the Gospel our lectionary, the structure of three readings and a hymn/poem psalm each week, helps us understand what Jesus’ statement means for us.

And it’s done with one of those great, swashbuckling Bible stories, even though a lot of the action comes before and after the words we hear today from the Hebrew Scriptures in our first reading.

The great prophet Elijah is not in a great place when our story begins. He’s on the run, and the first thing he says is, he wants God to let him die. Elijah is definitely not having a good day.

There's exciting stuff that comes before this reading – Elijah's had a massive face-off contest with the priests and prophets of the false god Baal, and Elijah has come out on top. He's the gold medal holder in the Greatest God Olympics. And not leaving it at that (let's remember these are violent times in the history of the people of Israel), Elijah has all the Baal prophets put to death.

In this religious conflict Elijah pulls off the ancient equivalent of speaking truth to power. And Jezebel, the queen of the land where Elijah won, is so angry that she calls for his death. Elijah has to run for his very life.

That's when we come to the prophet in our reading, exhausted from doing the work of the Lord, burned out, ready to die. Experiencing exhaustion and burnout isn't strange territory for us, either. We recognize the feeling that no matter what we do, it isn't enough. There's always another wrong to right – more suffering, injustice, fresh disasters – so we try to do more. And we end up feeling exhausted and “less than,” when we really just want to feel faithful to God's call. Our energies are depleted, and in our gloom we think about just walking away.

Today's story about Elijah shows us the way out of despair. First thing, he goes into the wilderness. When we're in the wilderness of our own lives, it can be terrifying and we

want to get out of there ASAP. But the wilderness is also where divine encounters happen: the Israelites wandering in the desert, Jesus' forty days, Elijah's own experience.

The wilderness is like a blank page; it can be disorienting, but it's also a place of possibility, where the old ways don't work anymore. Not knowing the way forward can open us up to Holy Presence. Rather than planning, managing, figuring it all out, we can become aware of all we don't know, and surrender to the wilderness, trusting that God will meet us there. When we can sit in our unknowing, we may receive a divine messenger as does Elijah.

Next thing, what Elijah gets in the wilderness is rest. He lays down the burden of working for the Lord and receives deep rest. Not a quick power nap, but sustained rest that restores his body, mind, and spirit.

When we look for rest, it's not always in the best places. Some of our favorite go-to's are overwork, alcohol, binge-watching and binge-scrolling. None of these provide true rest. Rest may not have to be sleep – it could be play, or focused creativity. But for full restoration, solid sleep is essential. And our acts of rest may be acts of faith, our letting go of having to feel in control, becoming more open and available to how God is calling us to the future.

Third, my favorite thing God does for Elijah, is sending an angel telling him to eat. No “get back to work” or “get going, already,” but rather, have a little nosh. Just have something to eat. A friend of mine said when reading this, “God must be Italian!”

And God provides the nourishment for Elijah, nothing fancy – a simple cake and some water. To make sure we’re getting the message, the rest and nourishment are repeated. The angel invites Elijah to recognize his humanity, his need for food that will provide strength for the road ahead.

We can and do ignore our bodies, denying ourselves both rest and food. We may even resist being among others who know they need rest and food. So, in First Kings we’re invited to embrace our humanity, the human needs that show our connection to the One who provides. Elijah gets the strength to travel for forty days to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. There he’ll have a close encounter with God, God’s own self coming and speaking directly to the prophet.

The psalm reinforces the message that God provides for God’s people: “I sought the Lord, who answered me and delivered me from all my terrors.” And “Taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are they who take refuge in God!”

In this morning's Gospel reading we find Jesus, the Bread of Life that nourishes all of us, God's new provision for the journey into abundant life.

Jesus is speaking to the same crowd of people who've followed him, known him as a teacher and experienced his miracles, who also know Jesus as one of their own. Because they know his family, watched him play as a boy, grow up, learn a trade and leave home, just like the other neighborhood kids, the people in the crowd think Jesus can't be all that special. He *can't* be the one God sent for their redemption, can he?!

And maybe some of us can identify with them. When we're in distress or afraid, we may look for a God to show up in strength, to answer quickly and clearly. The people in the crowd may be offended by Jesus saying that he, a man just like them, is the answer to their deepest longings and needs.

How could God have anything to do with ordinary, mundane life? God is supposed to be up in the clouds, not down here with us. Why would God want to suffer the problems and embarrassments of human life? It sounds ridiculous. How can someone who's like the crowd, save them? How can one like them even *be* saved? The people may be afraid they're not really worth saving.

And we're not that different – I'm not that different! The foundation of our faith can seem fragile sometimes. Do the words in a sermon really make a difference? Wouldn't it be better if a heavenly chorus of angels appeared to sing God's praises?

The water of Baptism, the water used to anoint Kayleigh Marie, comes from the same tap from which we drink and brush our teeth and bathe. It's not special or different. And the bread and wine of communion aren't special, either. They're ordinary, common – you'd think not even worthy of God's attention, let alone God's use.

But God does use ordinary things, common elements, to achieve God's will and to bring God's salvation to the world. Because this Jesus, the common, ordinary mortal like you and me, is also divine, uncommon, the actual Son of God.

Here's the promise Jesus makes in today's Gospel: God became incarnate, took on flesh and became like us, just so that God might save us and all people. The God who doesn't despise the ordinary and common but rather seeks them out – this is the promise behind the sacraments. Just as God doesn't despise such ordinary things as water, bread, or wine, we know God doesn't despise or abandon us ordinary people.

In the sacraments we find God's promise to hold onto us and make us God's own, to be with us and never let us go, as God promised Kayleigh Marie this morning. And just as

God uses ordinary bread and wine to bring us God's saving word, so too God uses each of us to accomplish God's will and work in God's world.

At the font and the table God speaks to us most clearly, as God's promise of forgiveness, acceptance, and wholeness of life is given to us in a form we can see, taste, touch and feel. The sacraments invite us to receive God's faith-inspiring promises, and then return to our lives in this world with renewed courage and hope.

So let us come together to hear God's word proclaimed in the liturgy and the hymns, in the readings and the preaching. Let us come and receive God's sacraments and be touched by God's presence. Receive the incarnate God who takes physical form for us. Receive God's promise to use all that we have, and all that we are, for God's great glory.

Amen.