

“The Lions Grow Weak and Hungry”

In the name of him who is the Living Bread come down from heaven, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to address this morning's message to two groups of people in particular. First, to those who know what it feels like to be really down and out, those who have, at one time or another, been physically and emotionally spent and left feeling spiritually depressed and empty inside, who know what's it like to have suffered an especially painful loss, defeat, disappointment or humiliation, and who have come to a point in their lives when they've either said or felt like saying, "That's it! I just can't take it anymore!" If any that sounds familiar, then this message is for you. And if you happen to be someone for whom none of that sounded even remotely familiar, then this message is for you too; because I assure you, your day is coming. It is an inevitable consequence of living in this fallen world.

And that's one of the things I truly appreciate about the Holy Scriptures. It describes the human condition as it is, not as we would like it to be. That's refreshing, because we live in a culture that holds forth the ideal of the perpetually strong and independent person. Our heroes are the kind of people who have faced adversity with grim determination and who, through sacrifice and suffering, have found it within themselves to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve their goals. They are the kind who never quit. They never say, "die". They just roll with the punches and carry on. *We'd* like to be that way. And to some extent this idea spills over into our faith-life. Here the notion takes the form that says once you attain a certain level of maturity in the faith, you come to a point of spiritual independence. And having achieved it, you ought to be able to keep going and maintain a positive and upbeat attitude at all times. In fact, if you ever show any sign of discouragement or frustration, it's a pretty good indication that your walk with the Lord is not what it should be. It's a sign of weak faith. So, when things are going badly, and on the inside, you feel yourself getting low, you dare not let it show. Better to hide it behind a mask of good old-fashioned German stoicism or with an artificial cheerfulness reminiscent of the Simpson's character Ned Flanders.

But that isn't what we see in Scripture. Instead, like I said before, it tells it like it is. I mean, think about some of the great heroes of faith, people like Abraham, Moses, and David (to name but a few) – these mighty lions of God – yes, we see their moments of triumph; but even more, it seems to me, the Scriptures present them to us in their darker seasons. At times we find them depressed, with crushed spirits, at a loss to understand the Lord's hard dealings with them. We see them in moments of spiritual crisis, pouring out the bitter complaints of their hearts to God. We find them losing the will to continue. We find them giving up. As we said in the Psalm a bit ago, "Even the lions grow weak and hungry". And if it happens to the great lions of faith, how much more might we expect the same thing to happen to the rest of us? Which is exactly why, I think, we are shown the heroes of faith at their low points: so that we can learn from their examples – and more to the point, learn how the Lord saw them through their hard times.

In today's Old Testament lesson, it's great prophet Elijah whom we find at what is certainly the lowest point of his life. He is lost, alone, fearful, exhausted, and without food or water somewhere out in the Sinai desert. And as bad as these external conditions are, what's far worse is what is going on inside him. In his very soul he's beaten. He is disillusioned and demoralized. And now he's throwing in the towel. We find him lying in the dust trying to take shelter in the meager shade of a spindly desert shrub, begging God to just let him die. And what's most surprising is that we find him here in this wretched condition only a few days following the greatest triumph in his life. Less than a week before, he was riding high at the peak of his glory. He was the most popular and respected man in Israel. He was considered the greatest champion of faith in the Lord. Now he's lower than dirt. What happened? What brought a man like him to this point of hopelessness?

Elijah, you may recall, was God's prophet during the time of the divided kingdom, and he did most of his work in the northern kingdom of Israel. The king there was named Ahab, and he was a very shrewd politician, but a weak and vacillating believer in the Lord. Oh, when it was politically advantageous, he paid lip

service to the Lord God (he was, after all, sort of expected to do that as the king of Israel); but the truth is that he relied on his own worldly wit and wisdom to see him through.

Now it happened that Ahab, in order to seal an important political alliance that would strengthen his position, married the daughter of the neighboring pagan king of Tyre. The name of this princess was Jezebel (you've probably heard of her – her name is now synonymous with evil). And because the alliance thus formed was more advantageous to Ahab than it was Jezebel's father, Ahab had to make sure his new wife stayed happy. And she knew how to take advantage of it. Jezebel was very big on the worship of a Canaanite god called Baal Hadad, or just Baal as he was known. So when she moved into the royal palace in Israel, she brought with her some four hundred priests of her god. And in order to please his new bride, King Ahab put all these pagan priests on the government payroll, and he ordered the construction of several temples and shrines for Baal worship throughout the kingdom.

Now, Baal worship had always been a problem in Israel. Although it was suppressed, they never managed to get rid of it completely. But by marrying Jezebel and building the idol's temples, Ahab gave this false religion official sanction. And it wasn't long before it supplanted the worship of the true God almost completely. There were two big reasons for this. The first was that Jezebel demanded of her husband that he kill all the prophets of the Lord. Most of them were rounded up and executed; the rest went into hiding. Naturally, that put a damper on the worship of the Lord. But the other reason that Baal worship spread so quickly was that it was very popular with the people.

You see, Baal was a god who was very easy to understand and worship. In Canaanite mythology, he was the rain god. That gave him a very important place in that semiarid part of the world. Rain at the right time translated directly into crops. So, if Baal was happy, it rained, and there was plenty of food. If Baal was unhappy, everybody went hungry. It was that simple. So, the goal was to keep Baal happy. You did that by participating in various fertility rituals at his temples and sacred groves. Suffice it to say these were nothing more than wild, drunken, orgies. And the best part about Baal was that he was not at all concerned about moral issues. He didn't care how you lived your life or how you treated your neighbors. As long as you did your religious "duty", which was participating in the sexual excesses of his worship, he sent the rain and everybody was happy.

So it's not hard to figure out: you had your choice. You could worship (a) a God who can't be manipulated, but who blesses his people because he loves them, and who also demands of his people a life of holiness and purity, or you could worship (b) a god whom you can control by the things you do for him, and who's especially happy if you attend his wild sex parties. Oh, and if you chose God (a), you'd come under the wrath of the queen who would probably have you killed or drive you into exile. Faced with these alternatives, the vast majority of people abandoned the true God in favor of Baal.

In response to all of this, Elijah stood alone and confronted King Ahab on behalf of the Lord. Forgetting his personal safety, he went to the king and told him, "You are leading your people astray. You seem to have forgotten who the true God of Israel is. Apparently, you need a reminder. So go ahead and pray to your rain god. It won't do any good. There will be no more rain in the land, not a single drop, until the people return to the worship of the Lord."

What followed were three years of absolute drought. And of course, no rain meant no crops. The land became so parched and dry that it couldn't even be cultivated. The fruit orchards withered, and grapevines died. Livestock perished for lack of forage and water. People's savings were wiped out by the high price of imported grain. They were in desperate straits. Many faced death by starvation. Then, after three years, when the entire nation of Israel was long passed being named an official disaster area, the Lord finally directed Elijah to go back to Ahab to see if he'd had enough. Elijah went before the king and there he challenged the priests of Baal to a showdown to determine who would be the God of Israel. They were to meet at Mount Carmel, and all of Israel was invited to watch. Both sides would prepare an altar for a burnt offering. They would sacrifice a bull and lay it on the wood, but not set it afire. Instead, they would call upon their respective deities. The God who answered with fire from heaven would win and be the God of Israel.

Maybe you remember the story: how the four hundred prophets of Baal went first, and how they spent the whole day crying out to their silent god. After they'd been at it several hours Elijah started making fun of them. He goaded them from the sidelines to call louder. Maybe their god Baal was sleeping, or out taking a walk. They tried; but still nothing happened. They grew more desperate as it began to get late. They even started cutting themselves with knives to show Baal how earnest and devoted they were.

Then just before sunset, Elijah called to the crowd of onlookers, "All right, you've seen what Baal can do: Nothing. There's been no rain for three years and no fire from heaven today. Now, come over here to me, and you will learn who is really the Lord God of Israel." Elijah spoke a brief prayer, and immediately fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, stone altar and all. The people fell on their faces and acknowledged the Lord. They began to worship him. Then they rose up in fury and slaughtered the false prophets of Baal who had led them astray all these years. Later that very night, thick black rain clouds rolled in, the windows of heaven opened, and it poured. The drought was over.

And Elijah was on top of the world. "Now things will be set right", he thought, "Now the true God alone will be worshipped in Israel and there will be peace and prosperity. Everything will be as it should; and finally, I'm going to get some respect around here." He thought there would be a national revival of true faith and godly living; and since he was the man of the hour, he figured that he would be the one to lead it. But it never materialized. Instead of the vast crowds of faithful supporters that he was expecting to come rallying around him, all he got was a messenger who told him that Queen Jezebel was really angry about the death of her priests, and that she had commissioned several assassins to get rid of Elijah once and for all.

And no one came to Elijah's defense. No one was willing to stand with him. It suddenly became apparent to Elijah that the whole thing had been a big failure. The wicked queen was still calling the shots, Ahab was as flaky and faithless as ever, and worse, the people who had worshipped God in response to the fire from heaven, had, shortly after reaching their homes and watching the rain fall, decided that following the true God meant making some major changes in the way they lived their lives – changes they were unwilling to make. God or no God, they wanted to keep things as they had been. The revival Elijah had hoped for fizzled out before it began. His disappointment gave way to despair. He felt that God had let him down – and now there were hired killers after him. Rather than continue to trust in the Lord for his personal safety, he ran for his life.

Elijah had miscalculated badly. Why? Well, he imagined that there was a point that could be reached in his walk of faith beyond which he could go it alone – beyond which he would no longer need to rely on the Lord. For him it was the showdown at Mount Carmel. He needed the Lord to send the fire, but he thought he could take things from there. "Thank you, Lord, I've got it now. Watch and be amazed at what I can do for you."

It is the same mistake that many Christians make today. Some imagine that there is a point they can reach in their quest for godly living beyond which they can no longer be tempted and fall into sin. Others imagine a point where they no longer need to rely on God's grace and forgiveness. "Hey, I've already been forgiven! Why do I need to hear that again?" Still others imagine they've reached a point beyond which they no longer need to continue to feed their faith. In our own tradition, many consider Confirmation to be that point. "I've been confirmed, what else is there to know?" For others it might come later; but it amounts to the same thing: "I have become a lion of faith. I can stand on my own." And then one day the balloon is burst. A direct challenge to faith comes: a disappointment of some kind, a temptation that couldn't be resisted, a feeling of guilt that won't go away, or a personal crisis, perhaps one involving an illness or the death of a loved one ... whatever. We suddenly find ourselves like Elijah in a spiritual desert, without food or water, and our weak faith dying. We feel God has betrayed us, when in fact it is we who have wandered away from him because we thought we could go it alone.

Fortunately, for our sakes, God knows what we often forget: that the journey is too much for us. Even the lions grow weak and hungry. We cannot make it on our own. And so it is that we see the Lord coming to Elijah in the desert. He needed rest and food and water, and the Lord provided him all three. But far more important was Elijah's need for food and rest for his spirit. He needed forgiveness for his lack of confidence in God and his misplaced trust in himself. He needed his faith strengthened and his hope restored. And he

needed reassurance of God's limitless and unconditional love. He didn't just need bread to eat; he needed the bread of life that comes from heaven and restores the soul. And we need the same thing every day of our lives.

It is this bread that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel lesson when he says, "This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world." It's the good news that the Son of God bore our sins and weaknesses in his body, and was sacrificed to atone for our sin – even the sin of thinking that we no longer need his help because now that we've come this far, we can make it the rest of the way on our own. He sends this bread to us every time we gather here for worship, when we hear his words of grace and forgiveness, and when we come to his table to receive his body and blood. Through these means God feeds our spirits and strengthens our faith.

We see this in the story: after eating the bread God provided, Elijah was given the superhuman ability to walk forty days through the hot desert until he reached the Mount of God. If this great prophet needed it, we should understand that we too need superhuman strength to complete our journey to the glorious goal God has prepared. And the bread Jesus gives us provides it. May he give us the grace to recognize this, and to daily answer his call to "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!