

“The Journey Is Too Great for You”

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: In today's Old Testament lesson we find the great prophet Elijah at what is probably the lowest point of his life. He is alone, exhausted, and without food or water in the mercilessly hot and dry Sinai desert. As bad as these external conditions are, what's worse is what is going on inside him. In his very soul he is beaten; he is disillusioned and demoralized. He has given up. That's what led him here and why we find him curled up trying to take shelter in the meager shadow of a desert shrub, begging God to take his life.

This is not where or how we expect to find a man like Elijah. He is known to all as the steadfast champion of God. He has, up to this point, been fearless in standing up for God's truth. He's even performed a number of impressive miracles, including raising someone from the dead. All in all, he's been a living example of the power and strength of God in the life of one of his people. But now we find him a pathetic, broken shell of a man. And what may surprise you is that we find him here like this only a couple days after the greatest triumph in his life. Just days before, he was at the peak of his glory. Now he's lower than dirt. So what happened? What brought a man like him to this point of hopeless desperation?

Well, I knew you would want to know the answers to those questions, so I've prepared a little review. You may recall that Elijah was God's prophet when the king of Israel was the very weak and vacillating Ahab. Ahab was a politician in the very worse sense of the term. When I say he was weak, I mean that in a moral and theological way, not in terms of his ability to exercise political power. When it was politically advantageous, he paid lip service to God (he was, after all, sort of expected to do that as the king of Israel), but more often his own worldly self-interest won out. Say it another way: for Ahab leadership had nothing to do with godly character or integrity; it was “the economy, stupid”, and only that.

Now, in order to seal an important political alliance that would strengthen his position, Ahab married the daughter of a neighboring pagan king. Her name was Jezebel (you've probably heard of her). It happens that because the alliance was more advantageous to Ahab than it was to Jezebel's father, Ahab had to make sure his wife stayed happy. And she knew how to take every advantage of it. Jezebel was very big on the worship of Baal, a false Canaanite deity. When she moved into the royal palace in Israel, she brought with her some four hundred prophets of Baal. And in order to oblige his bride, Ahab put all these pagan clergymen on the government payroll, and ordered the construction of several temples and shrines for Baal worship throughout the kingdom.

Baal worship had always been a problem in Israel; although it had been suppressed, they never managed to get rid of it completely. But by marrying Jezebel and building temples, Ahab gave this false religion official sanction. It wasn't long before it supplanted the worship of the true God almost completely. There were two reasons for this: the first was that Jezebel demanded the death of God's prophets. Most were rounded up and executed; the rest went into hiding. But the other reason was that Baal worship was very popular with the people.

And that's because Baal was a very easy god 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 rituals and fertility rights at his temples and sacred groves. Suffice it to say these were usually 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 God who can't be manipulated, but who gives blessings to his people because he loves them, and who also demands of his people an entire life of holiness and purity, or you could worship a god whom you can control with the things you do for him, and who's especially happy if you attend his wild parties. Oh, and if you choose the former, you will come under the wrath of the queen who will make your life as difficult as she can. She may even have you killed or drive you into exile. Now take your pick. 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. Without regard to personal danger, he went straight to the king and told him, "You seem to have forgotten who the 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." God then directed Elijah to go into hiding until the time was right.

What followed were three years of absolute drought. And of course, no rain meant no crops. Fields became parched and dry; they couldn't even be cultivated. The fruit orchards 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.

During this time God saw to Elijah's needs first by having ravens bring food to him at his hideout by a small spring; and then later by having him stay with the poor widow of Zarephath, whose tiny supply of grain meal and olive oil miraculously never ran out. She always had enough for just one more meal for the prophet, her son, and herself. And here, of course, we see an example of God taking care of those who remain faithful to him; but on a deeper, spiritual level, it's meant to be a picture of how those who remain faithful to the Lord are connected to the source of real life – that is, God himself and his Word – while all others are going hungry; that is, they are cut off from the source of life because they're out of touch with the Lord.

Well, three years went by, and the situation in Israel grew worse every day. Finally, God directed Elijah to go to Ahab to see if he had had enough. Elijah went before the king and challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown. They met at Mount Carmel, and all of Israel was invited to watch. Both sides would each 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 one who answered with fire from heaven would be the God of Israel.

I'm sure 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 several hours, Elijah started making fun of them, urging them to call louder. Maybe Baal was sleeping, or out taking a walk.

The prophets grew more desperate as it began to get late. They even started cutting themselves open with knives to show Baal how serious they were.

Just before sunset, Elijah called to the crowd of onlookers. It was the moment for which he had been waiting for three long years. "You've seen what Baal can do: Nothing. There's been no rain for three years, and no fire from heaven today. Now, come here to me, and you will know who is 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 worshipped him. Then they rose up in fury, and slaughtered the false prophets of Baal who had led them astray all these years. That very night, thick black rain clouds rolled in, and it poured.

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

And no one came to Elijah's defense. It suddenly became apparent to him that the whole thing had been a big failure. The wicked queen was still calling the shots, Ahab was as weak and flaky 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, figured out 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 hung all his hopes on just fizzled out. His great disappointment gave way to despair. He felt that God had let him down. Rather than continue to trust in the Lord for his personal safety and well-being, he ran for his life.

Elijah had miscalculated badly. 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 – like he had every day for the past three years. 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 any more?" 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'm confirmed, what else is there to know?" For others it might come later, but it amounts to the same thing. And in one way or another, we all tend to do this – to think we can go it alone.

And then one day the balloon is burst. A direct challenge to our 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 ... whatever. We suddenly find ourselves like Elijah in a spiritual

desert, without food or water, and our faith dying. We feel that 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 all too often forget: that the journey is too much for us. We cannot make it alone. And so it is that we see him coming to Elijah in the desert. Elijah 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; he needed the bread of life that comes from heaven. And we need the same thing.

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 all by ourselves. He sends this bread to us every time 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, strengthens our faith, and assures us of his love.

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 God and his glory. And the bread Jesus gives us provides it. May he give us the grace to recognize that, and to daily answer his call to "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!