

“Simple Food”

1 Kings 19:1-15

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The Bible shows the figures of Israel’s history for what they are, often broken, or struggling, and many times failing. Today we read of one of those, one of Israel’s great prophets, Elijah.

Let’s review the background to the story. The prophet Elijah has been locked in mortal combat with King Ahab and his queen Jezebel. These two have strayed from the worship of the Lord and have promoted instead the worship of a Canaanite god, Baal. A dramatic showdown takes place on Mt. Carmel between the gods. On the Lord God’s side is Elijah; on Baal’s side are his priests. Altars are built for each god, and the first god who can ignite the sacrifice with fire is the winner. It is high drama. The priests of Baal whoop and holler and cry out to their god, but to no avail. And then, with full confidence, and a little cockiness thrown in, Elijah strides onto the stage, invokes the name of God, fire comes down from heaven, and Elijah scores the victory. And then he completes his victory by slaughtering the priests of Baal. Not a good moment for interfaith relations!

His faithfulness, as all faithfulness does, has consequences. Jezebel is not going to let him get away with killing her priests, and is determined to destroy Elijah. You would think that his attitude would have been one of supreme confidence. But the moment Jezebel declares that he is toast, his opinion of himself collapses. Not only does he flee, but he runs into the wilderness, away from everyone, and slumps under a solitary tree. Now a broom tree never grows in isolation, but here is one, that is so emblematic of Elijah’s isolation. He believes his life and work are over: “Enough is enough God, O God. Take away my life.” What has happened is that Elijah is in a depression, the blues, or maybe burned out, or lost his way. Perhaps the evil he has to confront is just too overwhelming.

Depression is real. It’s not invented. In the adult American population, 12% of males and 18% of females have had a major depressive episode at some time. Depression interrupts life. It leads to withdrawal. When you’re depressed, “a pall of darkness descends upon [your mind]. Life and light seem beyond reach. Something intervenes: a gray mist of separation, the inability to feel loved, a feeling of being locked away from everything and everyone – including God.”

During the 2020 Olympics Simon Biles had to withdraw from competition because she was experiencing something that gymnasts call the “twisties.” The twisties happen when gymnasts are in midair and lose their sense of where they are and how they’ll land, making the move risky. Biles described it as being “lost in the air.” How did something like this happen to her? She attributed her problem to stress and a failure in confidence. But with help and therapy she worked her way back to becoming in the current Olympics the most decorated American gymnast.

Elijah, in his own way, is lost in the air, lost in his blues. You would think that God would just pity him. But no, the only response at first is silence. Imagine Elijah sitting there in the dust of the wilderness and thinking, “Does anyone care? Is anybody there?” Silence. Here is what I think happened, and it happens to us.

You do your best, and then you discover that your best is not well received. Confronted with the evidence that God had defeated Baal, you would have thought that Jezebel would have said, “Elijah, you are the man now. I repent. I have been wrong.” But that did not happen. Truth was not going to convince Jezebel that Elijah was a star. She had her mind made up. Doesn’t make sense, does it? Some things just don’t make sense. You work hard building a company and then find out that your partner has been stealing assets. You spend ten years caring for your ailing husband, but nothing can stop the cancer. A beautiful marriage stagnates into boredom and routine. The list could go on and on. So much is out of our control. We cannot control how others see us, nor can we manage their reactions. The best of efforts and thoughts can be met with rejection. Oh, Elijah, we know what you are going through! We have been there. But God does not leave Elijah in the slough of despond. God is going to put him into some divine rehab.

The first thing that happens is physical. “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." Body and soul are a unity. Good food, rest, and exercise are restorative of the mind and soul. But hold this in your mind for awhile, and I will say something later. This was food prepared by God; it has a heavenly quality to it, and sets us up for a powerful insight: recovery from depression has a spiritual dimension to it. And that segues nicely into the next step of Elijah's journey toward healing. When Elijah woke up again, the text says, "Then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God." Elijah needed something more than physical food; he needed a spiritual feeding too.

God sends him on a journey. Let's call it a pilgrimage, and pilgrimages always have deep spiritual motivations about getting re-connected to what is important. God sends him to Mt. Horeb. Mt. Horeb was the place where Moses first met God in the burning bush. It was also known as Sinai, the place where God was calling the ancient Israelites to learn of the purpose and vocation to which God was calling, the purpose of holiness, enshrined in the Law. For Elijah, a trip to that holy mountain was a pilgrimage to his spiritual roots...a place to rekindle memories, to recall all God had done throughout history, to remember God's love for him and his people. The mountain was a setting that would force Elijah to think about something other than himself, a place where Elijah could remember that he was a child of God, a part of God's people, for purposes larger than himself. More was needed, of course. The next step in his recovery was prayer. The text says: "the word of the Lord came to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' "

And he prays, and it is an interesting prayer: he gives God a piece of his mind. Here's my paraphrase: "I've been your biggest fan; I have done all this hard work, done what I was supposed to, and I serve a people who don't appreciate me. They keep doing all this dumb stuff, chasing after other gods. I clean up every mess around here and what is there to show for it? Nothing. Instead that decadent queen Jezebel wants to hunt me down and kill me. I am the only one who cares." You hear the voice of burnout, of frustration, loss of purpose. "I'm the only one who cares and if I don't do it, it won't get done. And they want to take my life." That is one let-it-all-hang-out awesome prayer. We have all prayed like that, haven't we? There is nothing the matter with it. A little catharsis is good for the soul, especially with God, the best listener of all. In prayer we should take every feeling we have to God, every ounce of frustration and sadness, every joy or moment of depression. God wants to hear it. When you are in a funk and down in the dumps, pour it out to God!

There is one more very important step Elijah takes in his prayer life. The Lord said to Elijah, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." It's not the furious activity of wind, earthquake, fire, or anything else that will restore Elijah or us. A time is needed for quiet reflection on his life. A time is needed to be still to receive God's care and grace. You cannot always work yourself out of a depression or a slump. Remember - we are saved by grace, which is a gift; it cannot be seized through activity, but only received.

To be sure, there is one more step for Elijah. Simply going on a retreat is not enough. The Lord's initial question is repeated: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Once more Elijah pours out his tale of sadness and woe, but this time God gives him some work to do. God wants him to re-engage the world. "Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram." A depression will never go away if we sit around in our blues. There is an entire world that is so marvelous and interesting and that awaits our engagement. Get back to it, immerse yourself in your normal tasks.

We may feel exactly as Elijah did. We come to worship to get away from a harsh and challenging world that demands more work of us with little appreciation to show. We come to worship, burdened by the notion that everything depends on us or that we are indispensable to whatever plan we are chasing. We come to worship hurting. We come to worship in a blue spell, and sometimes we come here to run away from it all. But when we get here, we make a powerful discovery. Here we will be fed, as Elijah was, with a simple meal – bread and the fruit of the vine– but this is no ordinary food. It is heavenly food, that carries with it the presence of God that strengthens and restores. This worship is your Horeb, your Sinai, the mount of God, and this Eucharist is the very bread of heaven that brings life and a life that leads us back into a good world. Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Come to this table for all is ready!