

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Remedy for Times of Despair”

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My friends, we have been exploring the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Saint John these past few weeks. We have been exploring the question: what do you hunger for most in this life? I find it intriguing and somewhat disconcerting that in our first reading from Kings we have Elijah hungering for death. The reading begins: “Elijah went a day's journey into the desert, until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it. He prayed for death saying: ‘This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’” Have you ever felt that way? Maybe at times this severe, or maybe not as severe hopefully, but we all experience bad times at various different points in our lives, when we find ourselves collapsed on a desert floor. What I find remarkable is Elijah’s honesty with God in this moment. Elijah doesn’t mince words with God about how he feels. He simply tells God exactly what he is feeling, even when he is at one of the lowest times in his life. Even during the worst times in his life, he keeps his heart open to God and therefore keeps himself open to God’s grace. And a very interesting thing happens.

The reading says, “Elijah laid down on the ground. He fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat. Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water. After he ate and drank, he lay down again, but the angel of the Lord came back a second time, touched him, and ordered, ‘Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!’ He got up, ate, and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.” I love that reading. Elijah was hungering for death. God responded by giving him food and told him to keep moving.

Enter our Gospel reading. It begins, “The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’” This piece is fascinating because the only other place in the bible where we have the Jews murmuring in one voice is the passage from Exodus chapter 16. In Exodus 16, it says, “Here in the desert the whole Israelite community murmured against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘Would that we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!’ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you.’”

Now look, this episode from Exodus sounds a lot like what was going on with Elijah in the book of Kings, doesn’t it? It also sounds a lot like what is happening in the Gospel of John chapter 6 this weekend. Back to our question: what do you hunger for most in this life? Elijah’s answer was to die in the desert in despair. The Hebrews answer was they would rather die in slavery in Egypt. God freed them from slavery and all they wanted to do is to run back to Pharaoh. And this made me start wondering, when we ask ourselves the question any given day, “What do we hunger for most in life” how often do come up with really lousy answers?

And so, in our Gospel reading, “Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.’”

The question we are left with this week is the same question we had last week and the week before as we make our journey through the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Saint John: What do you hunger for most in this life? What do you hunger for most? Is it for food that perishes or for food that endures for eternal life? We all know that at times our answer to that question can be really lousy. We also know there are times and places in life when we can feel a lot like Elijah, collapsed in the desert. I find it comforting that God’s remedy for despair is food, food from heaven that is, and the command to keep moving as members of the Body of Christ. As Church, what do we really hunger for most? We hunger for Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.