

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Lutheran Church

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The pastor always ended his sermon the same way. In my first year of theological education at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, I was assigned to what is called a “teaching parish”. It was not an internship program such as what Vicar Barbara has here (you do that in your third year of seminary) but in the first year, a teaching parish was a congregation to which a first year student was assigned in which your role there was simply to observe the congregation, the life of the congregation. That meant that instead of me preaching, I would listen to the called pastor there preach, every Sunday. He was a very capable and gifted pastor, but he always ended his sermon the same way; the conclusion went something like this, with his voice modulated and a little bit softer, and he would say: “Come to the table. Come eat the bread, drink the wine. Come and receive the body and the blood of Christ. Come eat the Bread of Life”.

Okay, maybe it wasn't every Sunday, but it seemed like it. And after a while, as the weeks passed, I tried not to roll my eyes when he would begin that same conclusion. I was this first year student in my first preaching class, and I knew I was never going to end my sermons that way. The endings of my sermons would be empowering and interesting and varied! And I tried not to move my lips in synchronized motion with his for that last paragraph.

As an aside, little did I know that writing the endings of sermons would become the bane of my existence! They are the hardest thing I have to do in writing a sermon, and I even had a professor at seminary who used to say to me in preaching class, in his very thick southern accent, “Mizz Rouse, you ended your sermon over here. I wanted you to end you sermon back there.”

Anyway, in that first year, in my sophomoric state of mind, I was rolling my eyes whenever the pastor began that end of his sermon, but had I been in his shoes, had I ministered to his parishioners and known them as well as he knew them over the years, I would have understood why he led them to the Lord's Supper at the end of most of his sermons; I would have realized how many people in that congregation were just like Elijah – broken and tired and hungry.

“It is enough,” Elijah says in resignation, “I give up!” “I've had enough!” “Uncle!” Elijah can go no further on his journey; he doesn't care whether he lives or dies; in fact, an immediate death seems preferable at the moment. You'd think Elijah would remember all the mighty and prophetic deeds he had done with the power of the Lord God Almighty. He defeated false prophets, many of them, who were prophesying about false gods. And he healed the sick and he fed the hungry and he worked miracles. He spoke the truth of the one true God. Just take a gander at the earlier chapters of First Kings, you'll read about the different things Elijah did because he was called and enabled by God to do them. But now Elijah is running for his life.

Queen Jezebel . . . the evil Queen Jezebel of Israel, is out to get his head. She's out to get him because he has destroyed the religious cult that she so carefully established and cultivated and nurtured . . . and then demanded that all her subjects participate in. And those false prophets he defeated in a contest? They were her prophets. So you can understand why Queen Jezebel was a little ticked off at Elijah.

So, there's Elijah being hunted by Jezebel's army, and it's as much as if he can hear her shout, "You can run Elijah, but you can't hide!" So he has fled to the wilderness, but he knows it's just a matter of time before they find him. And they're probably going to kill him. It's no wonder he figures he might as well just give up now, plop himself down under a tree, maybe starve to death as quickly as he can, pray to God that he might put him out of his misery now. Elijah considers his existence kind of a sorry thing. He figures he's failed. It's enough!, he says.

Then just beyond these verses in First Kings, Elijah will begin to muse about how alone he feels. And you know, that's not a surprising way to feel, when you've reached the point where you want to give up. I read recently that when people suffer tragedies in their lives – great loss, the death of someone they loved, a divorce, serious illness – it's not just the pain of that loss that is so horrific for them, it's the loneliness they feel. A person in the midst of their own personal troubles feels so isolated from the community. That's Elijah. And that's a lot of people in the pews.

The pastor I observed in my first year teaching parish knew those people in the pews in front of him, knew them well. He recognized that behind the thin veneer of cheerfulness, these were people who had broken hearts, and they were struggling, they were parishioners who had reached their limit for what they could take. He knew there were people in his congregation who said, "It's enough." "I've had enough." Which of us behind our thin veneer of cheerfulness, behind our "Hi-how-are-you-thank-you-I'm-fine" greeting, struggle like Elijah?

The Christian writer and theologian Marva Dawn articulates very well the Elijah-like existence that most people have in our world. In her book *The Sense of the Call*, Dawn states that we can learn a lot from Elijah. She says that she suffers from a host of debilitating medical conditions – she has a whole laundry list of what she suffers from, and she struggles on a daily basis. At the point when she's writing this book, she's in the midst of a score of tests to determine if she is eligible for a kidney transplant. Her weakened kidneys are slowly destroying the other systems of her body, and she confesses that she's afraid. She writes, "I admit that I'm afraid only because you have probably felt the same way for some reason – perhaps from unremitting troubles at work, unsettling family hassles, intense loneliness, uncontrollable fears for your safety, unrelenting anxiety, or an accumulation of seemingly minor problems that add up to an overwhelming stack against you." She writes, "When we're in the valley of the shadow of death – for any reason – we feel virtually alone."

Dawn goes on to say that she has no pat answers that will suffice, and she says that the only answer for herself when she's in the midst of that deep despair is this, that "our eyes . . . be opened to the constant presence of God, Who carries us.", which is exactly the only answer that will suffice for Elijah.

He throws himself self under a broom tree, he's ready to die. But he finds that he's not alone. Rather, he's in the constant presence of God, who carries him. Okay, maybe God doesn't pick him up, but He sends an angel. He sends an angel to him with cakes of bread, a jar of water. I kind of picture a

stereotypical good Jewish mother saying, "Come on Elijah, eat! Get up and eat!" And then I think, that sounds an awful lot like that pastor in my first year teaching parish, who preached "Come to the table".

The angel insists Elijah eat or else the journey can't be made. And that's the first indication, the first hint we get, that he's expected to take that journey; God is not letting him off the hook; God does not remove the struggle that Elijah is going through. But what God does provide is strength to take on the struggle, and that will make all the difference.

Marva Dawn, in the midst of all of her physical pain, realizes that no matter how tempting it might be, she can't resign from life. God is not removing her struggles that she has on a daily basis, but what is it that God offers her to strengthen her to keep on struggling? Dawn says it's the Sabbath, it's the day of worship, it's the day that's a gift from God. She says that's what strengthens her and opens her eyes to the renewing presence of God, who makes promises to her about her future life and then invites her to his banqueting table to be nourished. In fact, she finds that just the thought that there is going to be a Sabbath a couple of days hence is enough to give her some peace.

It's not written in the liturgy of Holy Communion (at least not in my bulletin or hymnal) but maybe we should add the angel's words to Elijah, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." See, the Old Testament lesson leads us right into the Gospel lesson, which is where Jesus has this continuing conversation with people following him, who have been fed miraculously by Him (five thousand of them fed) with five loaves and two fish. And if you haven't noticed, we're wending our way slowly through the sixth chapter of the Gospel John, from July 30 through the end of August you're going to keep hearing these words from this chapter, Jesus' refrain, "I am the bread of life" will come back again and again. Now, we can either be bored by six weeks worth of what we think is redundant Bible material, or we can understand that John is trying to tell a story that will give identity to this person Jesus, tell us who He is, and how much we need Him. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Feast on Jesus. Receive His life. Journey on in His strength.

Jesus Christ gave up His body. This is not at all like Elijah's giving up. Jesus Christ give up Himself in the knowledge that in such loving self-giving for the sake of the world, He would bring them out of despair and He would offer them hope. He gave up Himself to bring us out of death and the kind of incessant grip death has on us and everything about us, and carry us into real life with God. His presence among us today is like that cake of bread and that jar of water that the angel brought to Elijah, because we're all Elijah. We hear His word and we learn from Him so much about what it is to be the children of God, and then we receive this meal in our worship together, and He becomes what sustains us so we can go back out there for another week in the trenches, and we can go back there for miles in the journeys that you and I take. And Jesus Christ will continue to carry us with His strength until the journeys that we have come to an end on this earth and then He will carry us at last into the glorious, resurrected life He promises.

You meet some interesting pastors when you're in seminary. Besides the pastor in my first year teaching parish who almost always ended his sermons the same way, there was the pastor I became acquainted with on my internship (my third year). I began my internship in Conneaut Lake in the northwestern corner of the state, on May 31, 1985. I wouldn't normally remember that kind of a date, but May 31, 1985 was when a series of devastating tornadoes hit northwestern Pennsylvania and northeastern Ohio.

Sixty people died in the Amish town of Atlantic, just south of Conneaut Lake; that town was destroyed. And just north of Conneaut Lake was the town of Albion, and part of that town was destroyed and six people died there. There was a Lutheran pastor in Albion, and that night after the tornadoes passed through and had done their worst, he began to walk through the rubble giving out Holy Communion. He walked through the streets, although I'm sure he couldn't tell one street from another by that time, he gave Holy Communion, bread and wine, to anyone he found wherever he found them. People who were moving cinder blocks and branches, and emergency workers who were doing search and rescue, and some people just sitting in shock on top of what used to be their home.

Now you need to know that he was a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church's policy on communion was that it was something called "closed" communion. We in the ELCA don't practice that, but Missouri Synod Lutherans do. Closed communion meant that normally he would only give the Lord's Supper to the people who came in the doors of his church, who were members of his church. But that wasn't what happened that night. Not that Friday evening. I suspect he changed his way and his tune because he saw God's people bruised, broken, unable to go any further, a lot like Elijah, and some of them ready to say "It is enough", "I give up". And I suspect he wanted to supply them with strength for the struggle he knew lay ahead for them, so he became Elijah's angel for them. Here was someone saying, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And they hungrily and thirstily accepted that gift from God.

It has taken years, but it has finally dawned on me what that pastor in my first year teaching parish was doing. I thought he simply couldn't find a more interesting way to end his sermons, but he knew all along he was being redundant. He knew he was as redundant as John chapter 6 is. But perhaps he figured that the Elijahs in his congregation, the ones ready to give up, needed to hear such an end to the sermon because what that end actually offered them was a beginning.

Amen.