

Tenth Sunday in Pentecost  
Text: 1 Kings 19:408 and John 6:35, 41-51  
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA  
August 9, 2009

### "Food, Glorious Food"

Elijah is one of my most favorite characters from the Old Testament. He was so dramatic and powerful. He did things with flare. His miracles were big and flashy. He really put on a show. And I love a big, flashy show. Who doesn't? Something that is really mesmerizing and magical. Like the miracle he performed in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Kings. The miracle that took place just before our Old Testament reading for today.

Ahab was king of Israel. God was very angry with Ahab. He had married Jezebel. Jezebel served and worshipped a false god Baal. Because Ahab wanted to make his wife happy, he built an altar to worship Baal inside the palace. He also allowed Jezebel to bring a whole entourage of priests and prophets of Baal into Israel. Not only did Jezebel bring in these priests and prophets who worshipped a foreign god into the land and the people that God had chosen as his own, but she murdered many of Israel's own prophets, prophets of the Lord. So, God sent Elijah to tell Ahab that there would be a drought: "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

Three years after this announcement God sends Elijah back to Ahab. Elijah meets with Ahab and challenges the foreign god, Baal: "Have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal who eat at Jezebel's table." Elijah's challenge was this: two bulls would be killed and prepared as sacrifices to Baal and the God of Israel. Each bull would be placed on its own pile of wood but no fire would be put to the piles. The 450 prophets of Baal were then told to pray for fire to light the pile of wood to burn the sacrificial bull. Elijah, by himself, a lone prophet of the God of Israel would call to his God, to our God to light the fire. So, the prophets of Baal cried out to their god. They did this for many hours, screaming and bowing before the pile of wood but nothing happened. They even cut themselves with swords and made themselves bleed for this false god and nothing happened.

Elijah called to them. He invited them over to his pile of wood. He instructed them to pour twelve barrels of water over the wood and the bull carcass so it was soaking wet. Then, Elijah prayed: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." And at that moment, a ball of fire rained down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice and the wood. The people who were gathered fell down on their faces and praised the God of Israel. Elijah then instructed those who had fallen down to worship the true God of Israel to seize and kill the prophets of Baal; all four hundred and fifty of them. And then it rained. The drought was over.

Now, Jezebel was not present for this demonstration of God's power. Ahab went to Jezebel and told her what Elijah had done and that he had killed all of the prophets of Baal. At that moment, Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to tell him that she would kill him. So, Elijah fled for his life. And this is where our text for today comes in:

“But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. 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. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He got up, ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”

Elijah wanted to end his work as a prophet after what he had just been through. The famous German-American theologian Paul Tillich wrote of the “courage to be” in three great life anxieties. The anxiety of death, the anxiety of guilt, and the anxiety of meaninglessness.

Any of these three anxieties can overtake us. They can destroy our will to go on. They can make us feel hopeless. They can even make us lose our faith. Our faith in ourselves, our faith in God.

Elijah was facing imminent death. Jezebel usually got what she wanted and she wanted him dead. He probably felt guilty about slaughtering the four hundred and fifty prophets. We shouldn't assume that he didn't. Our own nation's soldiers come back from wars deeply wounded with the guilt of killing, even when they believe in the justness of the cause and believe they have done their best under circumstances a lot of us can't even imagine. And, Elijah is clearly overwhelmed by meaninglessness. What good has all of this been, all of his struggle and pain if Jezebel wins out? He is tired, he is burnt out, he is depressed. He wants to die.

But in all of this anxiety, this confusion, this hopelessness, God sends a messenger, an angel, to come to Elijah's aide. He is given food and water to eat and drink. Elijah is fed. He is strengthened by this gift of food from God. He is so well nourished by it that he is able to live for forty days and forty nights on this one meal. He is able to make the journey to Horeb the mount of God, the place where Moses received the commandments. Elijah was given what he needed to continue. Food. Food to help him carry on. Food to help him complete the journey.

Without food we die. In today's Gospel Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread that came down from heaven. Those who were gathered there to hear this were perplexed by this statement. How could Jesus possibly be the bread that came down from heaven when they knew his earthly, human mother and father? The Jews were angry with Jesus saying these words because intellectually they could not understand it. They could not comprehend what he was saying.

Today's gospel reminds me of a movie that I loved when I was young. 'Hook'. Maybe you remember it. It's a take on the story of Peter Pan. Dustin Hoffman plays Captain Hook. Julia Roberts plays Tinkerbell. And Robin Williams plays middle age Peter Pan. The movie tells the story of what happened when Peter Pan left Neverland as a boy to go and live in the real world. He becomes a regular everyday businessman with many jobs and tasks that he thinks are incredibly important. He gets married and has a family. One night his children disappear. Tinkerbell then comes and tells him that Captain Hook has kidnapped them and he must go with her back to Neverland to rescue them. So he goes. At first, he can only understand Neverland, he can only see Neverland through the eyes of an adult person. There is a specific scene in this movie that really relates to today's gospel. It is when Peter Pan goes to have his first meal with the Lost Boys. There is this huge long table surrounded by many boys. On the table are piles and piles of colorful goop.

Peter doesn't understand why all of the boys seem to be enjoying themselves while they eat this goop. They are talking about what they are eating: turkey and mashed potatoes, pies, and cookies. But all Peter sees is this goop. He cannot see all of this glorious food because he only believes what he sees in front of him. He only sees through this intellectual, scientific lens he has cultivated while living away from Neverland. But then, slowly as the meal continues his perspective begins to change. He begins to see all of the delicious food on the table instead of the goop. And he eats and eats and eats.

Often we are told to just have faith. To believe. But it is difficult to understand faith, to explain faith. Especially when we as human beings try to intellectualize everything, when we try to explain everything. It is hard to let go, to hope, to believe that we will be fed for the journey.

But God does know that our journey is incredibly difficult, like Elijah's. We constantly need the "courage to be" in our great life anxieties. When a family member or a friend dies it is hard to go on living a full life with only memories of times past. When we face our own death, the end of our earthly existence it is hard to not want to seclude ourselves, to shut people out, people who love us. When we dwell on something we have done or not done, a guilt that consumes us, it is hard to put it out of our minds, to move on. When we feel like nothing we do or have done means anything to anyone it is hard to not give up, to become negative.

Sometimes we don't have the strength or the will to make it to tomorrow much less to eternal life. And all of us, all of us, struggle with these great life anxieties at some point in our lives. But just as God strengthened Elijah for his journey, God strengthens us for ours in many ways, through his Word, through prayer, through worship, through the Eucharist, through this community, through love. That bread of heaven, that glorious, life giving, life sustaining food, Jesus is all around us. It is here, for you and for me. Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you. Amen.