

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

1 Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

John 6:41-51

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In our first reading, the prophet Elijah has offended Queen Jezebel, and is running for his life. During his forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, his experience parallels the desert experience of the people of Israel many generations before. Just as the chosen people did, Elijah suffers weariness and doubt, discouragement and even despair. And just as God did not abandon the tribes of Israel, God stays near Elijah. The best evidence of God's closeness to the prophet is the heavenly food the angel provides for him. The food God provides saves Elijah from despair, but it has another purpose as well. It prepares him for the difficult work that God wants him to do.

So, the hearth cake and jug of water that God provides for Elijah, reminds us of the water from a rock and manna from heaven that Israel enjoyed in the dessert. But it also reminds us of the Eucharist. We too are sometimes weary, and doubtful. We too have been discouraged on our journey. Some of us have been tempted to despair. We are all sustained by the bread of life. And as was the case with Elijah, the Eucharist is intended to do more than build up our strength and quell our anxiety. It is meant to prepare us for the difficult work that God wants us to do.

It's a bit like the old joke about the galley slaves, who are

addressed by the first mate. He tells them, “Men, I have some good news for you, and some bad news. The good news is you can lay down your oars and rest for an hour. The bad news is that after you’ve had a break, the captain wants to go water-skiing. For us, the good news is the Eucharist. The bad news is that we can’t stay in church celebrating the Eucharist all week. That’s not what God wants from us. Before long we have to walk out the doors and face another week. There are jobs to be done, problems to be faced, the Kingdom of God to be built.

But, of course it isn’t really bad news, because, in Christ, the life that we would have to live in any case, is endowed with meaning. I remember reading about a fellow named Les Stewart, who lives in Queensland, Australia. Les Stewart typed the numbers from one to a million, in words, on a manual typewriter. (Actually he was on his seventh typewriter by the time he finished.) He filled 19,990 pages. It took him fifteen years. When asked why he did it, Les replied, “I needed something to do.” Now that sounds crazy. But is it really fundamentally different from the way we have spent some of our time? Is it really fundamentally different from the way people can spend their whole *lives* apart from Christ? In Christ we have purpose -- the best possible reason to do what we do. We are serving the Son of the living God, who lived and died for each one of us.

And because Elijah was *alone* in the desert, we have something going for us that he lacked. We have each other. When we are going through a particularly bad time, when discouragement threatens, we can draw strength from the person in the next pew, or the couple across the aisle. If she can remain faithful so can we. If they can carry on, we can too. And next week we might perform the same service for someone

else. It is at moments like this, that Christ's real presence in the congregation at prayer, as well as in the bread and wine, is most meaningful.

So, we eat the bread that comes down from heaven, so that we may follow the way of love, even as Christ has loved us.