

August 11, 2024 – 1 Kings 19:1-8, Ephesians 4:17-5:2, & John 6:35-51

To say that the prophet Elijah was disappointed would be an understatement. A huge understatement. This went way beyond disappointment. This went way beyond sadness or depression or frustration. This was despair. Elijah had completely given up.

What else can the words of our Old Testament lesson mean? “[Elijah] sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.” Elijah was broken. He was truly almost suicidal. He wanted his life to end. And though he wouldn't take it himself, he was begging the Lord to take it for him.

What brought this great man of God to this point of utter despair? I mean, Elijah is typically ranked among the greatest of all the prophets. Praying for death usually doesn't fit the mold of a hero of the faith. How did he get here?

Well, it all started with a king named Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel. Who were quite possibly the two worst rulers in the entire history of ancient Israel. And I mean “worst” not just in the sense that they were bad at their jobs, but in the sense that they were evil people. Just idolatrous and corrupt and morally bankrupt through and through.

A king and queen who worshipped the false gods of Baal and Asherah. Who brought this idolatry into Israel and encouraged it among the people. Who stole from their citizens and murdered those who stood in their way.

Angered by their sinfulness, the Lord sends Elijah to call them to repentance and demonstrate the Lord's power over Baal. He tells the king and queen that there will be no rain in all of Israel until the Lord chooses to send it again. At that point, Elijah leaves, and not a drop of rain falls on Israel for the next three years. The nation is brought to its knees.

So Elijah returns. He hopes, maybe, that Ahab will have learned his lesson. But Ahab is just as stubborn and idolatrous as he was before. So Elijah tries something else. He tells Ahab to bring the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah who now reside in Israel to Mount Carmel.

And there they have a showdown: Baal & Asherah verses the Lord. They will each build altars with offerings upon them. Whichever god sends fire to burn up the offering first will be the god of Israel. The 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah spend hours praying to their gods. Pleading with them. Cutting themselves with swords. But nothing happens.

Then out comes Elijah, who douses his own altar with water, just to make his point even clearer. He says a single prayer. And the fire of the Lord comes down from heaven with such intensity that it burns up the offering, the wood, and even stones of the altar. Until there is nothing but a smoking crater left in the ground.

The people rally to Elijah and to the Lord. They chase down the prophets of Baal and Asherah and slaughter them all. It is a great victory for the Lord. And seeing the people renew their devotion in the one true God, Elijah tells Ahab that the Lord will bring rain back to his people.

It should have been a time of joy and celebration. There's just one problem: even after all of this. Even after a three year drought. Even after defeating the prophets of Baal and Asherah. Even after showing that the Lord had power to bring back the rain at single word.

Ahab doesn't repent. Jezebel doesn't repent. The king and queen are just as stubbornly idolatrous as they've always been. And, in fact, Jezebel's response to all this is to put out a call for Elijah's head.

And Elijah is simply broken. How do you deal with people who hate the Lord that much? Who are that willfully blind to God's power? Who are so corrupt that they would seek to murder an innocent man just because he proved that their gods were impotent to help them?

Ahab and Jezebel were exactly what St Paul describes at the beginning of our Epistle lesson. People walking in the futility of their minds. Darkened in their understanding. Alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their hearts. Callous and given over to sensuality, greed, and every kind of impurity.

That is the world that the prophet Elijah lived in. That is the world that St Paul lived in. That is the world that we live in. A world that is corrupt and deceitful and driven by sinful desires.

For a moment, that world crushed Elijah. He looked at it and he just wanted to die. “Lord, just take me. Take me away from this sinfulness. Take me away from these sinful people. Take me away from this broken world.”

But it's just for a moment that Elijah despairs. For God answers Elijah's prayer. He doesn't kill Elijah. He doesn't take him away from this sinful world. He does give him a break from Ahab and Jezebel. He gives him time to rest and sleep and regain his strength. But better than that, he does something else for him.

God feeds him. The angel of the Lord comes to Elijah twice with bread and water, and says, “*Arise and eat.*” He tells him bluntly, “*The journey is too great for you.*” What I'm asking you to do is something that no human being can do on their own. But I will help you. I will sustain you. I will give you strength.

That angel was no ordinary angel. For, as I mentioned, this was the angel of the Lord. And throughout the Old Testament, the angel of the Lord is special. The angel of the Lord speaks with the authority of the Lord himself. He acts with the power of the Lord himself. He is the Lord himself.

And this is why most confessional Lutheran theologians recognize that the angel of the Lord is not really an angel, in the traditional sense. The angel of the Lord is Jesus. The pre-incarnate Christ. The Son of God before he became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus came and fed Elijah with bread and water. Jesus came and spoke to Elijah. Jesus came and gave Elijah strength for the journey. A journey that would see Elijah fasting for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. Just as Jesus himself would eventually do so.

But Elijah survived. He survived because he was not fed by bread that perishes, but by the bread of life. The living bread who came down from heaven. The bread who would give his life for the world.

Elijah survived. He survived Ahab and Jezebel. He survived that journey in the wilderness. Most of all, he survived his own doubt and despair. He did not commit suicide. He did not give up. He did not abandon his God, like so many Israelites had.

He survived because he had hope. He had the hope of a God who came to him in his worst moment and fed him with heavenly bread and living water. He had the hope of a God who had not abandoned him, but sustained him and guided him through the wilderness to his own mountain. He had the hope of a God who still spoke to him through his own Son, the angel of the Lord.

We look at this very broken world and it's easy to lose hope. It's easy to despair. It's easy to say, “God just take my life so I don't have to live in this sinful place anymore.” And it's even easier to say all that when we look at ourselves, at our own sinfulness, and realize that we're part of the problem.

For though the world around us may be corrupt and hard hearted and darkened in its understanding, we have our own moments of sensuality, greed, and every kind of impurity. We have our own moments of callousness and hardness of heart. We have our own moments of despair and doubt.

We look outside ourselves and we see a dark, sinful world. And we look inside ourselves and we see dark, sinful hearts. And we begin to wonder, “Is that all there is? Darkness and sinfulness?”

But then, as he did for Elijah, so Christ does for us. He comes to us in our despair and he gives us hope. He tells us to rise and eat. To feed on his Word. To feed on his sacrament. To rest in the Gospel and be refreshed by the water that wells up inside of us, so that we are never thirsty again.

For we are not abandoned by our Lord. Far from it. For the bread that he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. There is no reason for despair when you have a God who loves you so much that he would die for you.

And yes, the journey is long and difficult. But we do not go by our own strength. And we do not seek an aimless goal. We go in the strength of baptismal waters and the body and blood of Christ. We go to the mountain of God. A new heaven and a new earth, where the old has passed away and the new has come.

We live with hope. Hope in the love of God. Hope in the forgiveness of sins. Hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. You are sealed for the day of redemption. You have no reason to fear. No reason to despair. The angel of the Lord is with you. Jesus Christ is with you.

This world can be very disappointing. And the sinful people within it so frustratingly hard of heart. Especially when those people are... ourselves. The journey is too great for you alone. But it is not too great for your Lord.

He has walked this path already. He has been through the wilderness. He has arrived at Mount Calvary, the new mountain of the Lord. He has died and risen again. In him you have hope. Arise and eat and go in the strength of the Lord. Amen.