

Pastor Joe Polzin
1 Kings 19:1-8
“Great Journeys”

Year B – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 12, 2018

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

From our Old Testament reading, 1 Kings chapter 19, “And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched [Elijah] and said, ‘Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.’”

When you think of a journey, what comes to mind? Perhaps a trip of some sort, especially during the summertime, like when we like take all sorts of journeys to different locations. Or perhaps when you think of a journey, a broader meaning comes to mind, such as a journey through life, going through a different stage of life, from school to a career, to raising a family, or retirement. It’s all a journey.

Some people use the word journey to describe a *time* of their life when they learned an important lesson, perhaps from a hardship or difficulty that they went through. It may have been a difficulty they brought upon themselves, or perhaps an *unwanted* difficulty, something we would never have chosen for ourselves—a time of unemployment, a medical hardship, having to watch a loved one suffer, or even losing someone we love. These can all be types of journeys, joyful ones as well as ones that are very hard.

Elijah was on a journey in his life. In fact, he had been on quite an incredible journey. He arrived on the scene in 1 Kings as a prophet of God. He served the Lord during the reign of King Ahab of Israel, which was no picnic. Ahab had married a foreign queen, Jezebel, who turned Israel away from worshiping the true God to worshiping a false god, Baal. And for doing this and much more, Ahab provoked God’s anger more than any of the kings of Israel before him (1 Ki. 16:33), which, if you look at the other kings of Israel, that’s saying a lot!

So, Elijah’s job was to be that lonely voice in the wilderness, calling a whole nation away from idolatry, and towards repentance. No wonder John the Baptist 800 years later would be called another Elijah. And like John, Elijah did some pretty impressive things.

Elijah spoke against Israel’s blatant idolatry. He prophesied there would be a drought, not one drop of rain, for more than three years. Elijah performed some amazing miracles, feeding a widow and her son, even raising that widow’s son from the dead when he fell ill.

But perhaps one of the most impressive things God did through Elijah happened when Elijah directly confronted Ahab for abandoning God’s commandments and worshiping a false god (1 Ki. 18:18). And he tells Ahab to gather all of Israel and the 450 prophets of Baal and meet him on a mountain. And they would have a competition of sorts.

They built two altars with two sacrifices. And the prophets of Baal prayed to Baal. And when nothing happened, Elijah even prodded those false prophets. “Keep crying aloud,” Elijah exclaimed, “for he’s a god, isn’t he? Maybe he’s thinking, or in the bathroom reliving himself [yes, he actually said that], or he’s asleep, or [catch this], maybe he’s on a *journey*.”

When nothing happened, Elijah then gathered the people close, and he rebuilt a true altar of the Lord that had been torn down by the idolaters. And to show God’s undeniable power, Elijah had this altar doused with water three times. And Elijah prayed that God would make Himself known as the true God. And so God sent fire on the altar and it consumed everything.

The people fell on their faces in the presence of God, and Elijah then led the people of Israel to put to death the false prophets. And just like that, 450 of the most powerful leaders of that false religion were gone. And as a signal that God was with Elijah and the people, for the first time in over three years there was finally rain again.

God had Elijah on an amazing journey, having just had this profound mountain-top experience. You would think Elijah would be storming the gates at this point, having placed all his trust in God and watching God deliver. But instead, and this is where our Old Testament reading today begins, when Ahab told his wife, Jezebel, what Elijah had done to her prophets, she was infuriated. And she leveled a threat against Elijah, “May the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of [those prophets] by this time tomorrow.”

Despite this great journey on which God had been leading Elijah, Elijah was afraid, and he ran for his life. He was destitute of any of the Godly courage he had had just *days* before. And the Bible says he “went a day’s *journey* into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’ And he lay down and slept.”

Elijah was either still afraid that he might die, or deeply ashamed that he had run in the first place. But either way, Elijah was overwhelmed by the greatness of his journey, and thought it should end there. And he was willing to give Jezebel exactly what she wanted: his life.

Journeys, especially great and difficult ones, can take their toll on us. They can even bring us to the point where we throw up our hands, and out of fear, or shame, or pain or just plain exhaustion, we want relief. We turn to God and say, “Can’t this be enough?” Have you been there before? Where the waves of life keep washing over you, one right after another, and all you’re trying to do is catch your breath?

We may wonder, what does God think in all of this? How will He respond? Well, Elijah was about to find out. When Elijah thought it was time for his journey to end, in his shame and his defeat, when he was ready to give up all hope under that tree, God wasn’t ready to give up on him. Elijah was woken up by an angel, who told him to get up and eat. And there was a fresh loaf of bread and a jar of water. Elijah ate and slept again. And the angel came one more time, woke him up, and said, “Arise and eat, *for the journey is too great for you.*”

Elijah had messed things up pretty well. When he should have been at his boldest, when he should have been leading the charge against the gates of idolatry in Israel, he actually began to run the other way. He had a crisis in his life, and he had a crisis of faith. The journey proved to be too great for Elijah.

But God didn’t need Elijah to demonstrate his own strength and merit for this journey. If that had been God’s plan, then this would have been where the story ends. Instead, God comes to Elijah and says that although the journey was too great for him, it wasn’t too great for God. God doesn’t wash His hands of His weak and sinful prophet. Instead, He nourishes Elijah with His mercy and grace.

Martin Luther writes about this passage in 1 Kings, about Elijah’s failure and sin. And Luther says we take comfort in the weaknesses of the saints of the Bible. Real people, with real sin. And we take comfort, not in their sin, but in God’s forgiveness, and how God works through them despite their shortcomings. In Elijah’s case, God provides him with the daily bread that he needs, the physical sustenance of bread and water. But more than that, God provides Elijah with the spiritual strength, the faith that he would need to complete the journey that God had planned for him.

Our reading ends with Elijah traveling to Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God. And if you kept on reading, you would see that it would be there that God would graciously reveal Himself to Elijah, just as He did on that same mountain to the Israelites when He was leading them out of Egypt on their great journey. And God assures Elijah, as He did the Israelites, that His presence was with him, and He would enable Elijah to continue on.

And so it is in our lives today. God knows that the journey is too great for us. In fact, this life affected by sin—the sin of the world against us, and our own sin which pollutes our lives on a daily basis—the path we’re on in our lives is too great for us. We constantly grow timid and afraid when we should have faith. We run the other way when we should be boldly confessing Christ. We cower when we should have strength. But there isn’t a single human alive who has the strength to make it through this world still standing. We are all subject to sin, and the schemes of the devil, and eventually death.

But God doesn’t need you to demonstrate your own strength and merit for this journey called life. If that was God’s plan, your story would be over long ago. And that’s why God took it upon Himself to journey to this earth, to live this life for you, in the person of Jesus Christ. Where He made His very presence known through him.

And though Jesus faced the brunt of the attacks, the worst that the devil and death and our own sin could heap upon him, Jesus didn’t end up sleeping under a tree in despair. Rather, he was willingly nailed to a tree out of love. And Jesus didn’t say, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life,” he said, “My life is enough for the sins of the world, Father. It is finished.”

Elijah was nourished by the bread that God provided, but more than that, he was nourished by the strength of God’s forgiveness, grace, and love. Jesus nourishes you with daily bread, yes, like he fed the 5,000 with bread in the wilderness. But more than that, he nourishes you with his forgiveness, grace, and love. He nourishes you with himself.

That’s what we heard in our Gospel reading today. Jesus told the people, “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:48-51).

There’s no greater gift you could have received than Jesus, the Son of God, who gave himself for you. And he continues to offer himself to you, nourish you with his forgiveness, grace, and love every time you hear his Word, every time you partake in Holy Communion. You receive, and are nourished by the very Bread of Life, Jesus himself, who forgives your sins, and gives you the strength to continue on this great journey.

And Jesus also lets you see the ending to your journey—it’s already been written for you. Did you hear it? Again from our Gospel, Jesus says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:37-39).

The Father has given you to Jesus, and Jesus will never cast you out, he will never lose you. Instead, he sustains you through your life in this world, and when your journey ends, he promises you a place in the life of the world to come when he raises you from the dead.

“Arise and eat,” Jesus says to you today, “for the journey is too great for you. I am the Bread of Life. And for this great journey, I give you everything you need.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.