

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B, 8.12.18

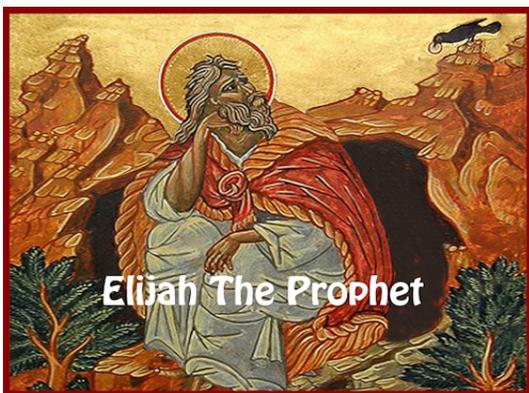
1 Kings 19:4-8/Ephesians 4:30--5:2/

John 6:41-51

WONDROUS REJUVENATION

The prophet Elijah, the focus of our reading from the Hebrew scriptures, holds a special place in the heart of Jewish tradition. When a Jewish family gathers at Passover to celebrate the Seder supper, they set a chair and an empty place at the table for Elijah the Prophet..... and a glass filled with wine. Jewish legend recalls the mystical appearance of Elijah in times of trouble – coming to bring a promise of relief and redemption, to lift saddened spirits, and to plant seeds of hope in the hearts of the downtrodden. On the night of the Seder supper the memory of beloved Elijah is invoked. The family prays that his spirit will enter that home and every home. At one point in the Seder meal, someone in the family opens the front door of the house, and leaves it open as the following prayer is sung:

May the spirit of Elijah, who enters our home at this hour, enter the hearts of all people. May he inspire them to love you, and may he fill them with the desire to build a good world, one in which justice and freedom shall be the inheritance of all.



If we ever needed a patron saint -- someone as powerful as St. Christopher or St. Jude -- Elijah would be the best candidate we could find in my estimation. In today's reading, he serves as a powerful role model for us all. It's important to know the background of today's scripture reading in order to appreciate good old Elijah. He has just been chased out of his homeland by the wicked pagan queen Jezebel, wife of king Ahab, who together were leading the people to the worship of the false god Ba'al. Jezebel's name, as you know, has become synonymous with a woman of ill-repute and with vengeful women throughout the centuries. Driven out of town for preaching about faith in Yahweh, the One true God, Elijah finds himself on a desert journey with his strength waning. His thoughts are the thoughts of anyone who has run into hard times:

How much longer can this go on?

I've had enough! I feel like I want to die!

There are times when Intense discouragement or depression can have a devastating effect on us. Annie and her husband were so looking forward to the new baby. Excitement swept their household like a Midwest summer storm when she found out she was pregnant. A long-awaited dream seemed to be coming true. Not quite three months had gone by when a routine check-up by the doctor revealed that there was no heartbeat. Annie had lost the baby. The miscarriage was a cruel act of fate. Annie asked her mother:

"Is God punishing me for something I've done wrong?"

In her mind she knew that God wasn't, but in her heart she felt cheated and angry. She just wanted to stay in bed and hope this was a bad dream that would disappear when she awoke.

At times we may feel there is just no way or no reason to go on. Discouragement can arrive unannounced, unexpected, unprepared for and quite suddenly. Or it can come as a slow draining away of our energies; the fibers that hold the soul together feel like they're weakening and ready to break. In either case, we find it difficult to go on. In fact, so wearisome can life seem that sometimes we're not sure we want to get our strength back at all. It's just too painful to return to the daily round -- hard to get up in the morning, hard to smile and hard to nudge oneself through the day or through the task or toward the finish line.

Discouragement makes a person want to give up and say: *The heck with it all!* -- with trying to do the right thing for ourselves and others; with keeping at our job or keeping our promises; with caring for those we love with all our hearts. One of the pastors of the Church in the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem, wisely reminded the early believers:

*The dragon sits by the side of the road,
watching those who pass.*

Beware lest he devour you.

We go to the Father of Souls, but

it is necessary to pass by the dragon.

Even a little child can feel a sense of extreme danger and hopelessness. When we hear a little one sobbing we describe her as "crying her heart out." With Elijah we can be overwhelmed by the same "end of the road" feeling when we just want to lie down and die.

I'm not suggesting that Elijah is a good patron saint because we can identify with his despairing feelings, however. His dark words are not the end of the story. The scripture tale goes on to describe a marvelous encounter of rejuvenation.



The angel of God provided him with food for the journey that would strengthen him. So powerful was this miraculous food of bread and water that he could then travel tirelessly for forty days to the mountain of God at Horeb. Such was God's careful concern for him. [We could call that little hearth cake the first piece of *angel food cake* ever served.]

Everything we believe about the Eucharist is summed up in Elijah's experience. We come to the Lord in the Eucharist, not as an escape from our daily problems and difficulties, but as the food which nourishes us in order to face them with faith and hope. The communion we share with the Lord and with one another gives us courage to carry on. It doesn't remove our pains and problems; it doesn't placate us or make us escapist. The Eucharist reassures us that God offers wondrous rejuvenation. We are never abandoned in our despair. Through Christ and through his power at work in our lives we are renewed with fresh vitality and enthusiasm.



In light of all that we believe about the Eucharist, it's strange that for a long time an attitude has prevailed in the Church and among individual believers that, in order to come to the Lord's table, one had to meet certain requirements or qualifications. It often seems that individuals or groups of people who need the nourishment and healing power of the Eucharist the most are the very ones who have felt "cut off" from the Lord's Supper.

Donna comes to mind; she's a divorced Catholic who, through no sin on her part, found herself in a marriage which failed. She remarried outside the Church for a number of reasons. She feels estranged from the community – unworthy of receiving Christ in the Eucharist -- the very Christ who said:

"Come to me, you who are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest."

Should she not take refuge in the Lord during this challenging time in her life and find a place at the family table?

Brian comes to mind. A busy and active college student, he sincerely believes in his heart, but it isn't often these days that he gets to Mass. His energies are focused in so many directions and his creative impulses find him searching various pathways as he explores for himself the meaning and values by which he will live his adult life. When he does join us in prayer at Sunday Eucharist, can he not find here a table of welcome where he can experience

the presence of a loving God and an accepting community? Is there not enough food here to sustain him for his journey?

How often do any of us experience a crisis or struggle which persists for weeks, perhaps months? Instead of seeking the strength which comes from Eucharist, many absent themselves from Mass or communion, feeling that the struggle and burden make them unworthy to share the Lord's meal. The situation isn't limited to the Catholic Church. I recall speaking to a Lutheran friend who said that she had only received Communion twice in her Church because it was so drilled into her that a person could only approach the Lord's Supper if she was really pure of heart and worthy. The woman said: *"My God, I'm only a mortal human being."*



We are all only 'mortal human beings,' and it's to beings such as us that the Lord said: *I am the Bread of Life; come to me and never be hungry!* The Eucharist isn't a 'merit badge,' given to us because we've been good. It's food for hungry hearts, it's forgiveness for sinful souls; it's a feast for all who believe, however feebly or falteringly. Our sharing in the Eucharist strengthens us to face the struggle, to pass by the dragon, and to walk the desert journey.

May our sharing in communion also encourage us to bring to the Lord's Table all who are tired or discouraged or hungry for the Bread which is Life for the world – Jesus, food for our journey... nourishment for our souls.



John Kasper, OSFS