

## God Who Nourishes – Teresa Holden

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Last week, Ruth talked to us about the different names that the Israelites (and we) can call God. Today, the lectionary leads us to another name—God who nourishes. In I Kings we see God, through angels, nourishing Elijah when he is spent and feels unable to go on. Then in John 6, Jesus gives a directive for us to receive Him as the Bread of Life. So, God demonstrates to us the same truth in two ways, literally and metaphorically, and that truth is this: God provides nourishment and life and defeats death for those who cry out to Him and believe.

When angels bring Elijah food and drink in I Kings 19, this isn't a unique experience for him. On two previous occasions that are recorded (and maybe even more that aren't recorded), God feeds him through extraordinary circumstances. In I Kings 17, when Elijah announces God's intention to punish the wayward Israelites through a drought, God begins a pattern of feeding him, first, through ravens who bring him meat and bread each morning and evening. Then a poor widow, who has barely any food to begin with, finds her scant pantry replenished enough for her, her son and Elijah to eat many meals together through God's provision.

When WE catch up to Elijah, we find him to be spent, physically and emotionally exhausted. The lectionary drops us down with him under a broom tree where he says that he's done; he's had enough, and he doesn't feel as though his efforts to rid Israel of its evil have been any more successful than the efforts of those who came before him.

Perhaps we should take a minute to review this evil that Elijah has been fighting. In I Kings 18, Elijah is involved in a dramatic showdown with Israel's King Ahab. Ahab follows in a line of disastrous kings, each of whom are described in I Kings 16 in comparison to how they measure up with the wretched King Jeroboam. Ahab wins the prize for being the very worst. I Kings 16:30-31 describes him this way: *Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam . . . , but he also married Jezebel . . . and began to serve Baal and worship him.* What were the sins of Jeroboam that Ahab so nonchalantly committed? He pursued actions that were unjust, ignoring the needs of the impoverished people in the kingdom, taking land and resources away from those who had some prosperity and making conditions worse for widows and children, who already were the most marginalized in society.<sup>1</sup> This, all in a time of drought and famine. God's displeasure with Ahab was because he didn't act out of a sense of justice or show care for "the least of these" in his kingdom. Beyond that, he also adopted wholeheartedly the gods of his wife, Jezebel, (including Baal). Jezebel, herself, actively pursued an agenda in which she ordered the killing of Yahweh's prophets.

Elijah's showdown with Ahab in I Kings 18 demonstrates the power of God in contrast to the complete impotence and uselessness of Baal. In a mountainous setting with an audience of Israelites and King Ahab, Elijah faces 450 prophets of Baal and challenges them to a test. Each side will place an animal sacrifice on an altar, and each will invoke their god, asking for fire to rain down and consume the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal go first. They entreat their god all morning, using all sorts of methods: they cry out; they shout and yell; they dance around the

altar. At around noon, Elijah begins to talk some smack, saying in I Kings 18:27, *Perhaps your god is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.* At this, the prophets of Baal shout even louder, and they begin to offer up their own blood, as verse 28 says, they were *cutting themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.* Of course, all of their pleas are to no avail. On the other hand, when it is Elijah's turn, he goes so far as to dig a trench around his altar to the Lord, and he pours so much water over his sacrifice that it fills the trench. As soon as Elijah prays to God, a fire engulfs the altar and even sets the trench of water on fire. In this same episode, the drought is broken and heavy rain begins to fall. When Ahab gets away and reports to Jezebel about what happened, she issues Elijah a death threat, and Elijah flees.

I heard this story vividly explained in the spring of 2017 when Aubrey McClain told it from the perspective of her discipline, Biblical geography, at a presentation she made at Greenville (now) University. In this story, the geography affirms that when Elijah runs, he heads toward a sacred space, Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, the site where Moses encountered God. The lectionary skips verse 3, a verse that has two quite different interpretations. In my NIV Bible this verse says that *Elijah was afraid . . .*, and so he *ran for his life.* Apparently in the Hebrew "afraid" can also be translated, *Elijah saw* [rather than "was afraid"] *and ran for his life.* Either way, we see that Elijah ran toward God and not away from him, whether he was fearful or not.<sup>2</sup> When we meet Elijah under the broom tree, he is on this journey, fleeing to God to try to understand what just happened. Although God showed up in the fire and then again in the rain, Elijah didn't accomplish what he believed was his goal—to take down Ahab and Jezebel, their worship of idols and their unjust actions that hurt so many Israelites. Elijah knew about how people were hurting first-hand. Remember the poor widow who provided him with food earlier? She had initially told Elijah that she had just enough food for her and her son, and then they were prepared to die, from starvation. But instead of Ahab and Jezebel being taken down, they were back at it—threatening him.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel helps us to understand what Elijah is going through. He describes the experience of a prophet in this way: "Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony. The prophet's theme is the very life of a whole people, and his identification lasts more than a moment . . . it is an involvement that echoes on. The purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history."<sup>3</sup> Elijah's identification with those who were dying because of Ahab and Jezebel's lack of care for them and their unjust actions caused him to feel urgency to stop these two leaders.

Even though we probably aren't prophets, we can relate to Elijah as he sits under the broom tree. The struggle for justice has been taking place for more than two millennia now, and we know from our little piece of it that it can become so wearisome. Lately, it feels like only the powers of hate and discord are influencing our world, and it can be very discouraging. We, like Elijah, need to find our broom tree and tell God about our discouragement. I appreciate that this passage shows that God can deal with our moments of deep discouragement, whether it relates to the injustice in our world or despair that affects us personally. Under the broom tree God lets Elijah rest and provides him with food. He doesn't rush him to sleep, eat and keep going. No, he encourages him to sleep and take all of the nourishment that God provides because there's more for Elijah to do.

So what is this food that God provides for Elijah? When I was a child, I assumed that Turkish Delight must be truly heavenly food, because it was what Edmund in the Narnia series was so obsessed with, even capable of selling his soul over. I understand that Turkish Delight isn't really that tasty, although it represented the epitome of treats to C. S. Lewis because of its scarcity during the rationing of World War II.

We can't know what God fed Elijah, but we know that it was real, solid, warm food and water. My husband, who coaches cross country and track would definitely affirm that water is the drink of champions. We receive a hint in John 6 that the nourishment that comes from God has a different quality, as well.

Let's take a minute to talk about what the lectionary does with John 6. (I think it's a little unusual, although I'm not an expert on the lectionary.) Our Gospel reading for five weeks is from John 6. This started two weeks ago when Mikey Ward spoke. Today is the first of three weeks when at least a verse of the previous week's Gospel reading is repeated. So, last week when Ruth Huston spoke, the gospel reading ended with John 6:35. This week the Gospel reading starts with John 6:35 where Jesus declares, *I am the bread of life*. This week we end with verse 51 that says, *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world*. Next week, the Gospel reading starts with verse 51.

The lectionary writers could be doing this to accommodate summer vacations—maybe you miss a Sunday because you're at the beach, but you can get a little speck of last week's reading the Sunday after. I don't really think this is the case, though. I think we linger in John 6 in order to fully take in its theme, which is Jesus as our bread. The word "bread" appears fourteen times in this chapter, and six times in today's Gospel reading.

What does Jesus mean when he says, *I am the bread of life*? When I first read this Scripture several weeks ago in order to prepare for this sermon, I wondered how we could understand this metaphor in a contemporary context. Some people today can't even eat bread, unless it's gluten-free. What would we substitute for bread . . . ? Does Jesus really mean that he is the energizing force behind our lives, kind of like . . . coffee? So today, He might say, "I am the coffee of life" (or fill in the blank—Starbucks, Tim Horton's, Adam Bros)? In that same vein, would He say, "I am the Ski or the Mountain Dew of life"? As I dug a little deeper into the significance of bread in the Roman Empire, I learned that none of these substitutions capture the nuance of what bread meant to people in Jesus' time.

John 6 begins with the feeding of the 5,000. Remember that when Jesus raises this issue of feeding all of the people who had come out to hear him, He asks of His disciple Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Of course, we know that the disciples are flabbergasted at this suggestion that they were responsible for feeding this large crowd. Philip responds to Jesus, saying, *It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite*. So we see here the idea that bread is monetized, people have a very clear idea of how much bread costs and how much they need. In the end, the people are fed through the donation of a boy's five small barley loaves and two small fish. Barley at this time was the grain of poor people.<sup>4</sup> This helps us to know that the boy was from the peasant class, not even

what today we would call “middle class.” We might be able to generalize from this that those who were listening to Jesus on this day were also mostly peasants.

Jesus talks throughout this chapter of bread and being bread, not barley cakes. What was the difference and why was this the metaphor that he used? Bread carried significant social and political significance in the Roman Empire. This was a vast Empire with an ever-growing population. In order to prevent unrest within the empire, it was important for enough food to be available, and bread was a vital source of calories. By the time of Jesus, wheat was replacing barley as the main staple of the Roman diet. Most of the wheat for the empire was imported from Sicily, Africa and Egypt. In times of want, hordes of people would be waiting and cheering in the harbors to see a shipment of wheat enter the empire. In cities like Rome, leaders provided a “bread dole” or benefit, giving male citizens (even some wealthy men) free bread, enough to provide roughly 3,000-3,500 calories a day.<sup>5</sup> This is a large amount. Nutritionists say that today’s much more sedentary men need roughly 2,500 calories in a day. We assume that men chose to share their bread with their families to keep them alive, too. During pagan religious festivals in Rome, bread would be distributed that had been baked with a bread stamp on the top, an emblem of the Caesar, that would leave this imprint after baking, so that everyone would remember who was providing it and worship him as a deity also.<sup>6</sup> So we see that there was also some political propaganda taking place using bread.

Jesus in describing Himself as bread conveys many nuanced religious, social and even political implications. I will try to unpack this metaphor within the context of us thinking of God as God who nourishes. Certainly, this metaphor of bread can kind of mean that Jesus is an energizing force, but all of those substances I named earlier—coffee (whatever the variety), Ski, Mountain Dew—these are all stimulants that give us a sudden jolt but don’t have lasting power to sustain. Jesus, as Bread, means to be our staple, our foundation, our daily sustenance that can take us through more than a couple of hours. Jesus, as Bread, transcends borders and boundaries. He offers nourishment to people beyond Galilee or the Roman Empire, to poor or rich. Over and over again in verses 41-51, He uses terms that indicate this nourishment that is experienced as new life is available to everyone, not just the Jews, not just people in the Roman Empire who can get daily bread from the Caesar—*all, everyone, anyone*, He says, can receive His sustenance as Bread of life. He angers Jewish people who know him and say, “What? This guy isn’t Moses who gave our fathers bread in the wilderness. This guy is Joseph’s son. Why is He calling Himself the Bread that came down from heaven?” Logically, they are trying to place Jesus into a context they understand. But Jesus goes a step further than them, pointing out that (different from the manna that Israelites received in Moses’s time) as Bread, he gives life that conquers death. Finally, He makes a clear reference to giving up His very body, His own life, to provide this sustaining, nourishing life to all who believe.

Elijah’s experience under the broom tree is very concrete, and because of that we can relate to his troubled soul and find comfort in knowing that God will also feed us in our moments of doubt, discouragement and even despair in whatever way we need to be fed. Jesus who, repeatedly and emphatically, uses the metaphor of Bread to describe Himself is helping us to see that not only does God provide daily bodily nourishment, but He foreshadows that He will give His own life for us to enter into life with God, that knows no boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Gale A. Yee, "The Creation of Poverty in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Religion and Society* (Supplement 10, 2014), 13, <http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2014/2014-10.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Jacobson, "Elijah's Humbling Lesson: Nobody is Indispensable," *Dedicated Journal*, <https://blogs.corban.edu/ministry/index.php/2012/10/elijahs-humbling-lesson-nobody-is-indispensable/>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul H. Wright, *Greatness Grace & Glory* (Carty, Jerusalem: CARTA Jerusalem, 2008), 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> "Historical Cultural Context," [http://liturgy.slu.edu/18OrdA080314/theword\\_cultural.html](http://liturgy.slu.edu/18OrdA080314/theword_cultural.html).

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Stone, "How Important Was Wheat in the Feeding of the Roman Empire?" 2, <http://www.schools1.cic.ames.cam.ac.uk/pdfs/Food%20at%20Pompeii%20-%20Wheat.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Muir, "Edible Media: The Confluence of Food and Learning in the Ancient Mediterranean."

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