

Jesus Christ: A New Way Of Life – Mikey Ward

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

After its hope-depleting two-minute introduction of alarm clocks wailing, Pink Floyd's iconic record titled "Time" proclaims: "...desperation is the English way." If desperation—the total absence of hope—is the English way of life, then desperation in the face of persecution is the Israelite way of life. In fact, in today's Old Testament reading we see Elijah embody desperation in the face of persecution; he is embodying the Israelite way. However, Elijah ought not to be surprised by persecution. Moreover, persecution should not be the source of despair. Yet, in a way (intentionally or not by the Deuteronomic author), his story is a literal tracing back of the Mosaic narrative—a deconstruction of the progress the Israelites had trudged through the wilderness under Moses' leadership. We twenty-first century Christians, living in a country where desperate events are aplenty, and observing the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death today, ought to take time. We ought to ask ourselves the following question: are we as followers of Christ living in response to His command to *taste and see* his promise of life, or are we living in a perpetual waiting for the next crisis to respond to with our own despair? Either way, in today's readings we are told that an opposing approach to Christ's way of life is easy to manifest. This approach leaves us in a cave...full of despair...asking God for pity. However, in today's readings we have been called to go, taste, see, and perpetually partake in the Triune God's life-giving sustenance all around us.

In today's Old Testament reading, we see through the story of Elijah a shift in the narrative of 1st Kings. No longer is the text's focus on the story of the king, but rather the protagonist prophet Elijah. His oath of drought in chapter 17 deeply challenges the political success of Ahab's agrarian culture. In the three stories of Elijah from chapters 17 to 19 we see acts of God's goodness giving way to increasing goodness in Elijah's life. It is in these chapters that we see that the God of Elijah is not challenged by the hierarchical antics of kings. He is not just merely the opponent of Baal. Instead, it is in the recesses of this world—say the likes of Greenville, Illinois—that the God of Elijah controls the forces of nature, of death, and thus, is the God of life.

Yet in today's passage the text's author is implementing a layer of irony and drawing a comparison between Moses and Elijah. In previous passages Elijah had approached Ahab, as God commanded, with no fear. And yet, when Jezebel sends a messenger promising that Elijah would incur a death similar to the priests of Baal the next day, he is stricken with insurmountable fear. This, to me, and to the text's reader, appears outrageous. Moreover, Jezebel's sending of a messenger could suggest that she herself has a fear of Elijah. Nonetheless, in a moment of fear Elijah flees to Beer-sheba. It is here that Elijah demonstrates how difficult it truly is to trust the Lord and to keep the Lord at the forefront of religious activities when our own social position has shifted. Elijah's social position has shifted dramatically—from a prophet in hiding to a significant public presence. Thus, we see that even the holiest of holies can become compromised by self-

serving tendencies. Therefore, when we read of Elijah in today's reading we see a man struggling with an interior crisis as well as exterior threats to his life.

In closer examination of 1st Kings 19:1 we see the author introduce the king, queen, and prophet in succession. As a literary tool, the text demonstrates the prophet's expanding sphere of influence. However, Jezebel quickly dispels any illusions of grandeur for Elijah in verse two. Whether by being killed or by fleeing, Elijah will lose his social position. As a result, ironically, Elijah allows fear to govern his actions—not fidelity to the Lord. In doing so, Elijah retreats and betrays the motive of previous acts. For example, at Mount Carmel in chapter 18 Elijah publicly asked to be endorsed as the Lord's prophet. Yet in the isolation of the wilderness he now requests to die. The repetition of the word *life* in verses 2, 3, and 4 is revealing. The prophet who fled for his *life* now wishes to die. Elijah wants to die, but does not want to be killed as a consequence of his religious responsibilities. According to Saint Ambrose of Milan, writing in the fourth century, Elijah did not flee due to fear of Jezebel, but rather this world.¹ Instead of a desire for this life, Elijah had endured a weariness of it. Nonetheless, he chooses to sleep—an indication that he has no energy or control over the situation.

In his sleep, a messenger of Yahweh visits Elijah twice. First, an angel touches Elijah. The description of this angel uses the same Hebrew word (*mal'ak*) used for the messenger that Jezebel sent to him in verse two. For a reader in ancient times this literary tool builds momentary suspense. Is this visitor an instrument of death or life? When the angel tells him to get up and eat he does so, but soon lies down again. However, when the messenger touches him and speaks to him a second time, the angel is identified as *the angel of the Lord*. Again he is instructed to eat and drink. Yet on this occasion Elijah is given a motive for the nourishment—he is about to set out on another journey.

What then, is the significance of this passage? For myself, besides contemplating whether or not I should consider a nap between my first and second platters the next time I visit Hibachi's—that way I leave with something other than greased up regret—it is obvious that in Elijah's narrative a meal has signposted the beginning of the next miraculous journey. Repeatedly in this story of Elijah we see God's messenger saying *get up and eat!* In doing so, the messenger gently strengthens and encourages the other to trust that Yahweh will sustain even in the face of death threats. Consequently, when the messenger encourages Elijah to seek life, not to give in to death, he is encouraged to trust that Yahweh will sustain him despite the threat that death has posed through Jezebel.

However, Elijah's passivity and doubt is demonstrated by his willingness to lie down to sleep. When juxtaposed with his instant response to Jezebel's threat of death, Elijah seems unaffected by Yahweh's message of life. If my Facebook Newsfeed has taught me anything, it is that we as a modern society are functioning in a way similar to Elijah: threatened by the notion of death and unaffected by the promise of life. Nonetheless, when Elijah is given a motive for his journey the second time, it appears that he has abandoned his self-pitying passivity and has taken the long journey to Horeb; BUT, in

¹ Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Flight From the World*, 6.34.

verse 10, when God asks Elijah why he is at Mount Horeb, he clearly maintains that he is the last prophet and that Jezebel seeks to take his life. Accordingly, we see that although it had appeared that Elijah was strengthened by God's life-giving meal in verse 8, he has in fact not overcome his desire to flee from Jezebel. Instead he has journeyed for 40 days and 40 nights to seek both refuge from the enemy in a cave and Yahweh's pity. This is to say: instead of traveling to Mount Horeb to do God's will, Elijah demonstrates how the threat of death is a serious challenge to Yahweh's power.² Nonetheless, instead of coddling the prophet, Yahweh commands action when he exclaims *Go and Return!* in verses 11 and 15. Similarly, how many have taken the path of righteousness with the threat of death guiding their path? In just over a month's time, the holiest of holies, Elijah, gone from triumphing over the national powers at Mount Carmel, restoring the covenant between the Israelites and Yahweh, to being alone, distraught, and ready for death. What a bewildering chain of events.

Now, for Elijah's sake, let yourself imagine his point of view. Imagine preparing and working daily for three years, to properly align the Israelites back with Yahweh's covenant. But, when you had done exactly as God commanded, you were not provided the moment of exultation you had prepared yourself for. This is worse than being a kid on Christmas morning not getting the gift you had been dreaming about all year. If you're too removed for that imagery, imagine you are in the bottom of the ninth of game seven of the World Series....you hit a home run to win the game, but instead of rounding the bases you run into your dugout because the crowd's cheering scares you. Rather than rounding the bases in exultation, you lose the game for your team and allow the other team to win in the face of defeat. Elijah fled the moment exterior threats aligned to his interior notions of despair. Death, to Elijah, appeared to be insurmountable, although he had previously cried out to Yahweh and seen with his own eyes Him overcome death. Consequently, in like manner to Elijah we have, we are, and we will continue to find ourselves in certain situations that seem insurmountable. However, we must prepare ourselves for a way of life that does not wallow in despair when life does not correspond to our expectations. Rather, as today's remaining readings suggest, we must live in such a way that praises God for His deliverance from such situations.

Today's psalter, Psalm 34, for example, is one of thanksgiving. Specifically, the Psalmist tells us to *taste and see that Yahweh is good. How blessed are those who take refuge in him.* However, commonly a psalm of thanksgiving is juxtaposed with a psalm of lament. This is to say, it is one thing to give thanks in response to assured deliverance or exultation, but it is another, more profound act to give thanks following a time of sorrow. In a way, today's psalm reading forces us to transition from Elijah's desperation and sorrow and urges us to acknowledge the goodness of God in the commonplace happenings of life. Moreover, today's psalter urges us to exalt God's name together in verses three and four! Thus, while the story of Elijah demonstrates that we have access to the Triune God on our own faith journeys, the psalter demonstrates how profound it is to learn from the faith of those around us.

² Alan j. Hauser & Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*,

For me, personally, I have been privileged to worship in this community for a brief but profound time in my life. It is has been a blessing. In today's readings we are told time and again to not fear, but rather eat of the eternal life that is Christ. It is especially ironic for me to preach on these texts, because at one time or another in the past six years each one of you have either directly or indirectly told me to quit in my desperate ways, to "Go" be attentive to the Triune God, and to return to my attempt to live in light of our incarnate faith. Specifically, this has happened when I have woken John Brittingham while nervously pacing over the creaky floors of our shared bedroom due to thoughts of inadequacy. I have cried desperate tears in the respective offices of several of you when I have allowed my own cave of worries to overwhelm and disorient my ability to see the Holy Spirit in my life. And it is here in this setting that time and again I have shaken hands, shared hugs, and broken bread with the majority of you in a way that embodies and reveals our incarnate faith.

One friend whom I have grown especially close to through my times at St. Paul's is sexton-alum, Jaison Ashbaugh. The last time I preached before you I told a story about how Jaison's biting words threw me out of my own despair and provided a life lesson for me to chew on for months to come. Once again, while I prepared for this sermon I received a beautiful letter from him in the mail. This letter was beautiful for many reasons. First, it confirmed to me that my friend with an affinity for pilgrimage was still alive, and second, that his unique penmanship—shaped by years of taking Greek with Ruth and Arabic with Matthias—echoed what I was studying in preparation for today.

In like manner to Elijah, Jaison has an affinity for adventuring out on his own. However, his most recent endeavors—rock climbing—has forced him to be dependent upon a community. Like Elijah he spends enormous amounts of time in preparation. He tells me of numerous hours of planning routes, studying the weather, and putting himself through rigorous physical regimens—all to prepare for one or two days of rock climbing. And yet, like Elijah once more, Jaison tells tales of disappointment and despair when a specific day of hiking or climbing does not go as planned. Thankfully, however, he has his community to fall back on. It is here that he has learned that in an age of Youtube and Google he cannot teach himself specific skills through sheer discipline and force of will. In fact, he has come to believe that this is the wrong way to go about it. He states, "It seems the most natural and pleasant way to learn a skill, philosophy, or way of life is to immerse one's self in a community that is practicing it...thus, one cannot learn just anything anywhere."³

In our New Testament readings today we are told that the best setting to confront the despair that often accompanies this life is the life-giving way of Christ. According to Michael Gorman, a dear friend of a dear friend, the thesis of Saint Paul's epistle to the church in Ephesus is to "walk along the calling of Christ".⁴ In today's reading to the Ephesians Paul describes a new life in Christ that prohibits falsehood (v. 25), prolonged anger (vv.26-27), stealing (v.28), evil talk (vv.29-30), and bitterness (vv.31-32).

³ Jaison Ashbaugh, Personal Letter, 31 July 2015.

⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 515.

Connected to each prohibition are an admonition and rationale. Overall, Paul is identifying speech and how it is intricately and delicately linked to Christ's sacrificial way of life. Accordingly, to truly be imitators of Christ and to be transformed in light of his wisdom, we ought to begin to dictate our lives with an approach that chooses life with our speech. As stated previously, the psalter exhorts that true life involves living in a particular way. Moreover, Paul and the psalter simultaneously identify the tongue as the means to depart from evil and to do God's will.

In verse 8 of Psalm 34 we see that, when we live in a sustained way of God, we simultaneously cultivate a taste that leads to vision. Additionally, in our gospel reading Jesus exclaims that the way in which we become imitators of Him is to perpetually partake in Him. He bolsters this notion with the image that He is the *bread of life* and *whoever eats of this bread will live forever* (vv. 35, 51). Obviously, this image has been pivotal for the Church for the last two millennia. However, Jesus's response is truly profound for two reasons. First, in the face of the question, *What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe in you?* (in verse 30), Christ links himself to God the Father when he states that it was the Father and not Moses who had sustained the Israelites in the wilderness. Secondly, when He declares that he is *the bread of life* He links himself to "spiritual nourishment" and thus, "eating" symbolizes "believing". Consequently, to partake in Christ as the bread of life is to believe that He is the crucified Messiah and source of eternal life with God. In this way, Jesus is manna or, as it is understood by the hearers of Christ's words, God's wisdom. Unlike, however, the manna in the Exodus narrative, those who eat of the life that Jesus brings will never die. Therefore, when we partake in Christ and the celebration of the Eucharist, we are partaking, being sustained by, and choosing life in the Triune God's incarnate and eternal wisdom.

Considering that today is potluck Sunday, it is fitting that throughout today's readings we have been bombarded with texts that focus on eating. Thankfully for us, we are privileged to partake in not one, but two, meals today. First, we express our belief in Christ in the celebration of Communion. Secondly, we express our love and belief in one another as we break bread together downstairs.

Although Christ's words are the most pivotal to our lives as Christ followers, our Old Testament readings and the Epistle demonstrate that to truly taste and see we must eat in a particular way. This is to say that, in like manner to Yahweh's messengers in 1st Kings, we ought to get up, eat, and be filled with the promise of the Lord of life. However, how many of us today have dwelled in our own despair? How many of us have consciously asked God to die as Elijah did or indirectly have lived in such a way as to ask God if we could die? Now I am being hyperbolic here, but we are Christ followers. We are not called to dwell in despair. We are not called to speak malice. We are called to choose the promise of life, and thus, choose life in Christ. Let us stand before the Triune God then, much like the prophets, apostles, martyrs, and all others who have come before us, and choose a way of life that cultivates a taste for the way of Christ. In doing so, we enter into a community which is bigger than any one of us or our social standing, Facebook posts, or feelings that we are one of the few who are "doing it right". Rather, we enter into a

community that chooses a life motivated by God's wisdom and that prepares for the next miraculous meal in our faith journey. Therefore, let us not continue on our life journey like Elijah, believing that we deserve God's pity. Instead, let us take, eat, and choose the Lord of life in such a way that confronts our own despair, allows God's wisdom to direct our response in the face of life's next crisis, and trust in God's life that does not cease with our worldly death. In this way, the life of Christ disarms all threats of death. May we live in such a way that savors this miraculous reality. Amen.