

Elijah Has Had Enough: A Piece of Toast and Gentle Encounters in Times of Despair

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Texts: Psalm 34:1-8; 1 Kings 19:4-8

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

“I have had enough, Lord” These are the first words that the prophet Elijah utters out loud in our scripture reading for today and boy, are they relatable. It seems that the glimmer of hope of things becoming more stable earlier this summer is fading away. The news of the delta variant exponentially increasing covid cases and the threat of more variants on the horizon feels like we are going backwards in our fight in this pandemic. This weekend Greenville, California experienced its 3rd largest fire in California’s history, so much habitat, so many animals and homes were lost and 8 people are still missing. We are reminded of these fires on the west coast by smokey skies and air quality warnings in our own state of Massachusetts. Perhaps as we don our mask to go to the grocery store we ask ourselves, maybe this mask will help with the smoke too. When I am honest with myself when I read the news lately or watch these new weather patterns take hold my heart gets

heavy and I want to shout a prayer “we have had enough, Lord.” Elijah is in the wilderness this morning and so are we in one way or another.

We enter the narrative in 1st kings during a lesser known event in Elijah’s life, a time when he finds himself in the wilderness after standing up to King Ahab and their god Baal. He has put in so much work to speak God into the world for Israel, to convince the people that God is the one and only God and the response he gets for his work is a death threat from Jezebel. He is overwhelmed, exhausted, and frightened. He is lost and so naturally he finds himself in a wilderness place. He gets tired after a day’s journey in this wilderness and lays under a broom bush and says to God, “I have had enough, Lord, Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” and promptly falls asleep.

This shocking request for God to take his life is not just one of exhaustion, but one of shame. He says, “I am no better than my ancestors.” He believes in that moment that he should have figured a way out of the situation he was in, that it was all on him, and perhaps that he shouldn’t feel exhausted at all. Wouldn’t a good enough servant of God hold himself together through an uncertain time? I’m just wondering out loud, but perhaps Elijah is feeling

shame because he's expecting that to be a good enough person of faith in this uncertain time there is no room for despair and no room for leaving himself open to the help of others. Perhaps he is clinging to what his vision of the plan looked like and now that it is all changing he thinks he has failed. And just as he asks for God to take his life, God gives him rest in the form of a nap.

What happens next is what I find most delightful about our passage for today. After Elijah lays down for a nap, an angel appears, touches him gently and tells him to get up and eat what is essentially a big glass of water and some toast. The angel does this not once, but twice in case it didn't stick the first time, as if the angel knew that Elijah would forget to nourish himself properly. The angel says, "get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." and in the end Elijah is strengthened by that food and goes on to meet God's presence at Mount Horeb not too much later in his journey.

Perhaps what the angel here was saying was that the journey is too much for you, alone, Elijah. That this journey in the wilderness is too much for anyone if we try to do it alone and without nourishing sustenance by our side for when we need to stop and rest. This scene reminds me of those steps that you are supposed to take if you are feeling overwhelmed. The first step is to

drink a glass of cold water, then a simple healthy snack, then a shower, then a short nap, a call with a close friend to remind you that you are not doing this hard and beautiful thing called life alone. These are the simple ways we care for ourselves, and how we care for one another so that the journey is not too much for us too. God reminds us and Elijah that we need to nourish ourselves in order to continue on in this hard work of being human in this time.

I heard this poem titled Heavy by Mary Oliver this week and would like to share it with you all this morning. Mary Oliver writes:

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had his hand in this,

as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,

as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.

Then said my friend Daniel

(brave even among lions),

“It is not the weight you carry

but how you carry it—

books, bricks, grief—

it’s all in the way

you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,

put it down.”

So I went practicing.

Have you noticed?

Have you heard

the laughter

that comes, now and again,

out of my startled mouth?

How I linger

to admire, admire, admire

the things of this world

that are kind, and maybe

also troubled—

roses in the wind,

The sea geese on the steep waves,

a love

to which there is no reply?

It might be different for all of us, but we are all carrying something heavy this morning. Whether that is the weight of the injustice in this world, the path towards equality that sometimes seems to grow as we progress, the state of our world and the effects of climate change that are becoming more and more severe, the return of the strain of worrying about where the pandemic will take us next, personal grief, loss of a job, loss of an identity, loss of a vision of the way forward out of this mess, whatever “this mess” means for you.

Yes, there is heaviness. And, despite all of this we are still breathing this morning by the grace of God. We are still able to laugh, and feel the breeze on our faces. We are able to choose kindness and offer someone a snack when they look overwhelmed. And one truth that the stories of the Old Testament,

the Torah, the writings of the prophets and the histories tell us is that God provides for God's people, through messengers, through things that we might at first glance think of as ordinary: a piece of toast, a hand on a shoulder, a word of reassurance that we are not on our own in anything in life. I invite us to ask ourselves in the coming week how we are being that messenger that brings nourishment to others and to ourselves? How do we remind each other that there is hope to be found in God's provision? Perhaps it is in those moments that we provide for each other that we are the closest to God's presence in the world. We might be that nourishment with a simple phone call to someone at church you've seen in a meeting but haven't actually had a chance to connect with one on one, with an encouraging word to your coworker about the presentation they worked so hard to put together, by taking the time to just pay attention to someone's story of exhaustion and despair and giving them permission to rest, by choosing to let go of caring about the little annoying things in our days and using that energy for ourselves and for being present to those around us. When we live with some extra grace for others and for ourselves we are embodying God's love and nourishment in a world that desperately needs it. We are doing holy work. And some of that

holy work isn't work at all, it is what we are made for: to admire the things of this world that are kind and maybe also troubled and have faith amidst our doubt that God is doing a new thing in and through us even now.

Amen.

