

Running for our Lives

The Prophet Elijah was running for his life. When we find him today, exhausted, lying down under a broom tree, he has had enough. It helps to take a look at what he was running from and what he ended up running to.

Now Elijah was a prophet who lived about 1000 years before the Gospel of John was written. At that time the king of Israel's Northern Kingdom, Ahab, had married a pagan wife named Jezebel, and had forsaken the God of Israel for the worship of Baal. Elijah challenged the monarchs, humiliated and destroyed the prophets of Baal, and then faced Jezebel's wrath.

That's when he started to run. All the way from the northern kingdom to the south, as far as he could get from the angry queen. And by the time he hit the border he was done. He had enough. He lay down under a Broom Tree and prayed for death and went to sleep.

And God answered his prayer. God said No. And instead gave Elijah life – in the form of a divinely baked cake and some water, all waiting for him when he woke up. It wasn't exactly a banquet, but he did get two helpings -- enough to sustain him on the rest of his journey, the angel in attendance said.

It is no longer a flight from death but a flight into the arms of God. Elijah travels 40 days and nights out of the land of promise and all the way to the cave on the Mount Horeb where God first appeared to Moses. This was deep in the wilderness that Israel had wandered in for 40 years. And in this place Elijah would encounter God's voice in a small whispering sound. And that voice would send Elijah back to do the work he has been given to do.

Elijah starts out running for his life, and ends up running into the life of God. But today we are asked to reflect on this mid-point, the fulcrum where Elijah lays down his life and God picks it up again.

Let's just teeter here for a moment on the point where the difference between our life and the life of God comes into view. For this is God's ultimate invitation from moment to moment, Eucharist to Eucharist – to lay down our lives and allow God to pick them up again. To allow ourselves to live into the life of God.

This act of running for my life, that is familiar to me. For me that can feel like just trying to stay ahead of the fears that are constantly nipping at my heels – fears for my physical and mental health, my family relationships and the people I love, for my job and my vocation, for my future, for my present, for the wellbeing of my community and my country. If I could see you, I bet you'd be nodding. Who hasn't in this past year and half or more not felt like they were running for their lives at some point?

But our readings today, and not only them but our weekly acts of sacrament and Eucharist all cry out: Enough! Enough running for your life. It's time to stop and consider another source of life – the life of God.

This is what Jesus puts on offer in this great Bread of Life discourse in the 6th chapter of John, that we've been listening to for weeks now. In a culture where food was the source of life, where people could starve and knew hunger, Jesus is talking about a different sort of food and a different source of life. When he talks about being the bread of he is talking about being the means by which God's life may enter our own. "This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die," Jesus tells his followers. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

And the genius of this analogy is that Jesus incarnates in it, inhabits it. Jesus's offer of God's life to all who wanted it was so true to his followers that it transformed the very bread they ate, reminding them as it did of Jesus's promise to be bread for them. It became the means by which they not only remembered what Jesus did in the past, but who he was for them in their present – alive, divine, empowering them with His Spirit, everlasting. The life of God didn't make them perfect, or they wouldn't need a constant reminder, one as ubiquitous as bread. But the life of God did put them to work striving for relationships of love and mutuality and diversity that undid the typical relationships of the time, divided as they were by class, and religious identity, power and ability.

And it meant you no longer had to run for your life, which in a time of diaspora is saying something.

What does it mean for our lives to be animated, re-oriented, and guided by the life of God? What would they look like?

I wonder if mine would look much as it does right now, except that I wouldn't be trying to run ahead of it, but would allow myself to slow down and walk through it, knowing that there is nothing in it that can separate me from the presence of God, the life of God, that courses through me. It would be a life that is both a choice and a surrender. An opening to and a letting go.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians describes the practice of the life of God in a church community where people get angry and disagree, where some come from unsavory pasts, where trust might be strained. The life of God acknowledges anger but turns to communication, truth telling, and a willingness to build up the community. The life of God asks this of us -- *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

What if our commitment to the life of God privileged these things, practiced them, sought them, or sought to restore them when we fall short, which we will inevitably do? I wonder if the pace of our lives, the urgency of them, would change a bit?

Lives that are focused on mutual understanding and repair and the spiritual strength and wellbeing of one another require a constant tending, a regular nourishment, a particular diet.

And that is why from its earliest days the members of the Jesus movement fed themselves with prayer and story, with ritual that evoked the presence of Jesus among them and in them with bread and wine. That is why they exhorted one another, by reading letters that they received from

spiritual heroes like Paul, and they held on to them and passed them down and returned to them in times of struggle.

Time and again the church found itself running for its life. And it often had to stop and remind itself that it already had the life of God coursing through its body. It had to accept the divine gift of that bread and wine, and trust in the journey that they strengthened it for.

Living into that has always been a challenge. It still is.

So today, as you are join in this time of nourishment by Word and by Bread and by One another, look beyond all of these things to the life of God that is waiting for you. Let you Amen by an invitation to the full journey, that you may walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Amen.