

The Place Where God Meets Our Needs

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost 2024

1 Kings 19:4-9

Laurel Oberstadt-Petrik

I have heard people speak on this passage in 1 Kings and say that Elijah is just being a dramatic, whiny teenager of a prophet. They denigrate Elijah for wishing to die. Or, on the other hand, they skip over this passage altogether in favor of the scenes on either side. But this passage is in the story of Elijah for a reason, and it's in our Lectionary today for a reason, too. I don't claim to know what the authors of 1 Kings were thinking when they included this story, though I do have some suspicions about why the Revised Common Lectionary editors picked this one. This is a story about God meeting our needs.

Each week we pray together as part of the Eucharistic prayer:

“Our Mother, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.”

It is the prayer that millions of Christians utter and mumble and say out loud every day, sometimes multiple times per day. It starts off with praise for God and an incitement for God's kingdom to come. But then we move from the kingdom of God to the most mundane of things: bread. Why? Why does Jesus place food in the second petition in the Lord's Prayer? I think this story we read in 1 Kings, the story of Elijah and the cake baked on hot stones, tells us a lot about why. But it requires us to put ourselves in Elijah's shoes and exercise some empathy.

Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. What was he thinking as he took that journey? He walked for a day out into the desert, this wilderness space a ways away from Beersheba, a village where he had left the servant who had been traveling with him. He wanted to be alone. He wanted, as we learn in the next verse, to die. He is despondent and ashamed, awash in a mire of negative feelings. What would that feel like?

(beat)

This passage is sandwiched in between two dramatic episodes in Elijah's life that we learn about in 1 Kings. Just prior to this, Elijah prays for rain to end a three-year drought and famine in the land. The sky has grown black with rain and a mighty downpour falls from the

sky. But Elijah outruns the rain, sprinting off to the south to Jezreel. When he gets to Jezreel, he receives a message from Queen Jezebel: if she catches him, he's dead. Before the rain and the running, Elijah was cutting the prophets of Baal down with the sword: he was killing 450 people following the miracle at Mount Carmel where God sends down a torrent of fire to consume meat on a water-soaked altar. After this story Elijah will go to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, and hear God's audible voice as a still, small, whisper.

But Elijah, this legend of a prophet, is terrified when he receives Jezebel's message. He flees Jezreel, going even further south into the wilderness with his servant. But then he wants to be alone. He goes a day further into the desert, to a place where there are very few trees, very little of anything. It has just rained, so the land is no longer in drought, but I imagine that even the torrential downpour that God sends isn't enough to make this area of desert particularly lush or green. It is a dry area, there is only a solitary broom tree.

Elijah sits down, and he prays. "God, take away my life, I am no better than my ancestors." He is filled with deep shame. After this great victory on Mount Carmel, and before he encounters the still, small voice of God, Elijah sits down in the desert and wishes that he were dead. I don't know about you, but I can relate to this. There are times in my own life where I have been so despondent, so full of self-hatred, that I cannot imagine a way forward. When I feel like this, I have withdrawn to my own wilderness: the solitary place that is my empty bathtub. I lay down in the cold ceramic and close the shower curtain. I want to be alone in the dark; I want to wallow in the shame and my own misery, or perhaps to let the cold ceramic shock the sadness and the fear away. Maybe you have felt like this, too. In psychology speak, this is what is known as passive suicidal ideation. You don't want to exist anymore, but you're not making active plans to end your life.

It's an incredibly dark and low place to be in. It is certainly not a place that we should make fun of. Elijah's emotions in this scene are real: they are terrifying.

So where is God? Where is the hope here, the gospel message? It's in the bread that the angel brings Elijah. The angel touches him and says, "get up and eat." And Elijah looks, and there's a cake, baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So, he eats and drinks, and lays down again. And again, the angel wakes him up with a touch, and Elijah eats and drinks once more. He is fortified by this food and drink: he goes 40 days further into the wilderness on the strength of it.

Elijah needs four things when he goes into the desert, and God provides all of them via this angel. He needs rest. He needs the comfort of touch. He needs food, and he needs water. All of our profoundly human needs, God meets. The angel doesn't scold Elijah for being in this emotional state. The angel certainly doesn't poke fun at him. Instead, we see

the God who sent the rain, the God who poured fire down from heaven onto the altar, the God who will speak to Elijah in a still, small voice in 40 days' time, this God meets Elijah's needs.

When we pray the Lord's prayer, we ask for God to meet our needs. "Give us this day our daily bread," is not a statement we can glibly remove from the Lord's Prayer because we can live on God's word alone: we need food, because we are hungry creatures. To need to eat is to be human. To need rest is to be human. To be awash in the mire of negative emotions that Elijah experiences in the wilderness is to be human. And God desires to meet our human needs.

In seminary I focus on what I call 'queer edible theology.' That is, a theology of food that embeds us in our embodiment, our state of becoming more like God and more like ourselves, the process of sanctification. Roman Catholic theologian Angel Mendez-Montoya calls this "alimentary theology": theology that nourishes. I've read a LOT of definitions of theology. Theologians and pastors are always speculating on exactly how to define this thing we do. Anselm of Canterbury writes that theology is "faith seeking understanding" all the way back in the 11th century. Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit theologian, claims in the 20th century that "theology is the science of faith...the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith." These definitions, like most definitions, focus on faith and reason. But faith and reason are both grounded in our bodily experience as humans. This is why Mendez-Montoya's definition of theology speaks to me so deeply. He writes:

"Like cooking, alimentary theology is a theology in the making: a performance that involves both contemplation and action...a vocation that is simultaneously gift and reception, preparation and sharing, contemplation and consumption, materiality and transcendence, human and divine." (*The Theology of Food*, 30).

Christian theology, Christian practice is not just about faith or reason. It is about our limitations and needs—our humanity—and the way God meets us in those limitations and needs.

The gospel for today comes from a lengthier section in John called "the bread of life discourse." We read from this discourse last week, and we will be reading from it again over the next few weeks. Jesus says he is the bread of life, the food that satisfies. "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."

Our hunger, our limitations, our needs: these remind us that we need God. It is why we take the Eucharist each week: bread and wine remind us of our dependence on God.

We are not satisfied apart from God. And the most human of all things—hunger—is what Jesus chose to remind us of that. The bread that is Christ, the bread we eat each week, that is the nourishment we need. We eat bread and drink wine or juice alongside hearing the word each week in the Biblical texts and in the sermon because we need these things to go alongside each other. Faith and reason, embodiment and consumption. Theology does not exist solely in our minds, but our minds inform our body's experience of what it is to eat the bread of Christ.

I am not claiming that the bread that Elijah ate in the desert was Christ—not by any means. But I believe that this experience that Elijah has illuminates our understanding of the Eucharist and of Christ as bread. We are hungry, thirsty, sleepy, full of emotions. Sometimes we are so despondent we cannot imagine a way through.

Beloved church, hear the gospel this morning: God meets our hunger, our needs where we are, and offers us life abundant. Jesus is our way through and onwards, the food that satisfies, the bread of life.