

“Eternal Food”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – 1 Kings 19:1-8
New Testament Lesson – John 6:27-35

The monks of New Skete, in their book titled “In the Spirit of Happiness: Spiritual Wisdom for Living,”¹ tell of a Seeker who visited their monastery in Cambridge, New York. The Seeker arrived as most visitors do, with no real idea of what awaited him.

As the monks note, “Life never seems to prepare us sufficiently for epiphanies. By definition, (epiphanies or spiritual awakenings) come upon us suddenly, dazzling us by their raw power. They are not magical intrusions from another world, but reality, naked and without shame.

Their very ordinariness shimmers with unexpected depth, which is why they take us by such surprise. It does not matter whether they occur in the majesty of (the grandest cathedral on earth²) or in the elegant simplicity of a wooden chapel, the effect is the same.

In the Seeker's own case,” write the monks, “whatever else he was living with, his confusion and fears, this unmistakable realization leapt out at him: God dwells here among these people. ‘This is what has been missing,’ he thought. ‘I've had it wrong all along.’”

In our Old Testament lesson, Elijah is beginning to think that perhaps he's had it wrong all along, even as he stands on the verge of a marvelous epiphany, a spiritual awakening of his own. But he's not aware of it. Instead, as he's running for his life, Elijah stops, turns his eyes toward God, and says, “It is enough, now, O LORD, take away my life.

Elijah has been through the wringer and is completely wrung out, nothing left, not even the convictions of his faith or the confidence of his past actions. All that's gone before might as well be for naught, nothing.

Elijah's entire life as a prophet was spent confronting King Ahab and trying to set the people straight, traveling through the wilderness, battling the false gods of Ba'al, striking down their prophets and confronting his people, who thoughtlessly followed their own misguided ways. And now, he's being threatened by powers beyond belief – in this case, by Queen Jezebel, who sets out to destroy Elijah. And so Elijah runs away and hides his head in the sand, literally; he sits down under a desert broom tree. A broom tree is a scrubby little bush that is low and prickly and uncomfortable.

¹ In the Spirit of Happiness, The Monks of New Skete: Spiritual Wisdom for Living, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 21.

² Specifically, Hagia Sophia.

You don't choose to sit underneath a broom tree; it's just the place you end up when you've got nothing left to give and not enough confidence in the future to get back on your feet.

Now, I don't know how well that resonates with any of us here today. I don't know if you've ever felt lower than dirt. But I suspect we all have, at some point in life. And I am sure that for anyone paying attention to worldly affairs – with nations spying on one another and all our top secrets up for grabs, regardless of the risk; gun violence and acts of terror more commonplace than ever before; church worship on the decline and moral ambiguity on the rise; and a lagging economy with not enough jobs and too many people struggling to get by

- I'm sure that anyone who is paying attention has a sense that we as a people have only two choices left – rise to the occasion or slowly but surely sink beneath the surface.

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Elijah, sitting under that scrubby little broom tree is ready to sink beneath the surface. 1 Kings tells us that after he decides to just shrivel up and die, "He actually goes from sitting to laying down under the broom tree...." It doesn't get much lower than that.

"Suddenly, an angel touches him and says to him, 'Get up and eat. I think God knew that Elijah was having one of those days – you know, you wake up, you eat breakfast, you battle 450 prophets of the false god Ba'al. It's hard work to be the only one left to do the job.

And I think God knows that we sometimes feel the same way, the only one left to do the job. Have you ever felt like it's all up to you and no one else gets it – at work or in your family, among your friends or teammates, here at church.

Does working 9 to 5 and being done for the day sound like a dream? Too much chauffeur duty for the kids or grandkids? Serving on too many committees and sitting in too many meetings? Is your list of To-Do's longer than the days you have to accomplish them?

And then, a more painful level – there's our struggle to deal with the loss of family and friends, whether through death, distance, or just a difference of opinion. It can leave us depressed and disheartened just like Elijah, wondering if not living is better than living like this, wondering if true transformation and renewal is even possible.

In Elijah's moment of doubt and despair, God meets him in all the chaos of life – in his fatigue, in his struggles, in his stress, in his depression, in his questioning, in his self-doubt. This is where God steps in and provides Elijah – and us – with the eternal food, the spiritual sustenance and physical strength we need to carry on just a little further.

We can be assured that, as we heard last week, God is ready to work miracles in the lives of those who call on God, and honor and follow God's leading – God is ready to work the miracle of all people restored to faithful and fruitful living!

God is ready to work such miracles even among those of us who are reluctant to move forward and to claim them. We know this because 1 Kings tells us that when Elijah could go no further, that's when God visited him a second time, through an angle of the LORD, (God is persistent); God touches him and says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

In other words, if Elijah doesn't partake of what the LORD offers him, than he might as well lay down under that scrubby old tree and die. If Elijah doesn't tap into God's provision and move forward, than he was right when he said to God earlier, "It is enough, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors, (no better than those who allowed the faith to falter and to be forgotten.)"

Now look, when it comes to the state of faith in America today, and the religious practices of this and most churches, and the spiritual lives of our families and friends and loved ones, there's no doubt that there is room for improvement.

I mean, just listen to this odd little story of what one lost soul had to say to another on the streets of Los Angeles. The man who approached the woman was unshaven and unkempt, and the woman was well-dressed. She was about to turn into one of the swankier shops on Rodeo Drive when the man stopped her and said, "I haven't eaten anything in four days." She looked at him, then looked at herself and said, "Wow, I wish I had your willpower." Kinda funny, but really, pretty disgusting. Because it's not without a grain of truth.

There are too many people in the world oblivious to the needs of others, clueless when it comes to just how hard it is to make it these days, and completely out of touch with any role they may play in making it that way, in leaving others to fend for themselves while the privileged live high on the hog.

This is not only true of our society, but it's true the world over. It's not only true for those who have no faith life and no connection to church, but also for those in society who attend regularly, but then fail to live into their faith values and practices.

Regardless of what we say in this country about believing in God, far too many people have allowed religious practices and spiritual growth to suffer. We've allowed religious practices and spiritual growth to given way to the lure of a "convenience society," where we want what we want when we want it, and waiting for God to speak to us and direct our lives, well that's a lost art.

Religious practices and spiritual growth have given way to the busyness of our time, where we have too much to do and too little time to do it, too little time to even think about sitting quietly and listening for God.

It is a lost art and we're just too busy for it – unless it isn't and really we're not, not too busy, if we make better choices. It's up to us to find a way to tap into God's word, even amid the challenges of this day and age. It's up to us to partake of the sustenance God offers us, sustenance that gives us strength and courage and competence for the journey that lies ahead.

It's up to us to get up and move forward, or lay down and die.

1 Kings says that Elijah "got up (the second time around), and ate and drank (what God had put before him). Then he went in the strength of that food for 40 days and 40 nights, to Horeb the mount of God."

From death's door to the mount of God, from a lowly broom tree to a Transformational experience! That's what 40 days and 40 nights symbolize – transformation.

The Israelites wandered 40 years in the dessert being tested and struggling forward before reaching the Land of Canaan, the land of milk and honey promised to them by God.

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested by the devil before he began his earthly ministry, a ministry in service to others that would bring him face-to-face with God.

And so, too, with Elijah; so too, with us. We travel through our seasons of wilderness, each of us at one time or another, ready to turn back like the Israelites and become slaves again under Pharaoh; each of us raising up our voices like Jesus and crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me;" each of us ready to crawl under a prickly, thorny, uncomfortable broom tree of our own making.

And just like Elijah, sometimes we find ourselves praying to God that we might die and be done with it. Or, if we've not actually sunk that low or ever been quite that hopeless, we've all been brought to give up on a dream of ours, to throw in the towel and just settle for what is. We've all found it easier to give up than to do what it takes to move forward. We've all been there. And the good news is, that's just where God meets us, most fully.

Last week, I promised we'd return to our New Testament lessons after today's sermon. We're not going to do that. Next week, we're going to stand with Elijah on the mountain top of the LORD, and we're going discover what is there for us.

So between now and then, continue to think about and journal on and make a list of those things we as a church or you as an individual might do to share the faith and to expand the Kingdom of God. And add another column to your list, a column that lists the practices we might take on that would enable us as individuals or as a church to go that extra mile on behalf of God.

What spiritual food might we need: prayer, scripture, meditation, truth or wisdom circles – which are really just groups of people listening for and sharing about God's word, like our church committees do when they're at their best.

There are a lot of ways we as individuals and this church as a community of faith can find our way forward – analytical ways, spiritual or contemplative ways, action-based ways, collaborative ways, individual ways. Whatever your style, whatever your need, God is prepared to lead us forward, if we're prepared to accept God's leading, if we're prepared to partake of the provisions that God has

given to us, prepared to undertake the disciplines and perform the duties that God has called us to.

It's up to us – as a society, as a church, as families and individuals – it's up to us whether to crawl under a tree and die, or to climb up the mountaintop and meet God face-to-face.

And we can each get started on that journey by making a list: what might we do to move God's vision for the world forward, and what might we need spiritually to take that first step?

If you have a list like that (or can create one) and are willing to share it for the betterment of this church, bring it with you next week and be prepared to leave it behind. We'll have a place to collect your ideas for consideration by our church leadership.

And you might also share your list with your family and friends: a list of the needs of our world or your life and the spiritual practices (if you can think of any to add) that God might be calling us to so that we are ever moving forward toward what God envisions for us and for our world.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, we know what it is to feel like the prophets of old, to feel out numbered, exhausted, and put upon by demands both worldly and divine. We get tired of needy people, of being the “responsible one,” of shouldering the burdens of our family and friends, co-workers, and yes, even the church.

In those moments, we ask Lord, grace us with the power of your strength and faithfulness. Remind us that we are not alone, that we can always count on your presence, whether in Spirit or in the form of a fellow servant of God.

We seek to encounter you, Lord, in a thirst-quenching, soul-renewing way.

Come to us, O God, to feed us with that food which only you can give, because you alone satisfy the deepest needs of the soul.

Center our living upon you, Lord, and remind us that if we live, we live by your grace and mercy. Remind us of this in all that we do and all that we say. Remind us in this place and in all the places of our lives,

And especially, Lord, remind us of your grace and mercy in this place and at this time, when it is that we most fully remember you, just as surely as we remember the words that you taught us to prayer together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.