

Albany Presbyterian Church
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The story of Elijah being nurtured and fed by the hands of the Angel of the Lord has been the go-to story that inspired me when ministering to those who I met in the Hospital faced with all sorts of health issues, from mental illness to cancer diagnosis. Under the broom tree, when you are weary and exhausted, all your hopes, sense of security, and certainty about your life are gone... When you are left alone, there is nothing more comforting than that God comes to you in the angel of the Lord. Elijah was the only prophet of the Lord and was against 450 prophets of Baal. And previous to the story of him fleeing for his life was the massive killing of all the prophets of Baal. And then there came the persecution, Queen Jezebel and the King of Israel, Ahab, being furious and eager to pay back what he had done, and they came after Elijah's life. And so tired from all the running and fleeing, overwhelmed with pain, mentally, physically, and spiritually, Elijah cried out to God. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors, which meant I am better off dead; then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. This is where Elijah met God; twice, he was visited by the angel of the Lord. Twice, he was fed and given drinks that revived his strength. (1 King 19:1-8)

This is our third Sunday with the story of John 6, the theme of Jesus, the bread of life. Jesus says I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. Of course, people did not see how he would do this. Confused and annoyed, they even said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, I came down from heaven?" vv. 42. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat" in verse 52. Many people heard him, especially the Jews, and they started to plot against him. Many of his disciples also turned away and even decided to betray him. (6. 64-66) Because they did not understand or even take offense at what he said about himself.

John tells us that it occurred near the Jewish Passover feast, during which the story of the Exodus was recited and celebrated to recount God's deliverance of the people of Israel who were slaves in Egypt and wanderers in the wilderness where they cried out to God. Jesus frequently alluded to the events of Exodus 16-19, explaining that just as God provided food through Moses to satisfy the Israelites, he now offers himself as the living bread to grant eternal life to the world.

Strange it may be, Jesus now sees how there are those who believe those who don't and those who belong and don't belong. "Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me," and "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." "No one has seen the Father except the one from God." "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you"

Soren Kierkegaard, A Danish Philosopher, sees that there are three stages of being aware of who or where we are: spiritually; the first is stage of unconscious despair, which is, using the metaphor from the gospel of John when we don't even have an awareness of the Spiritual hunger and thirst; the second stage is the state of conscious despair, where we are fully aware of our spiritual hunger and thirst but you are still in despair because you don't know what to do. The third is the stage of faith, fully aware of hunger and thirst, by trusting in God who satisfies this hunger and thirst, living beyond despair and their limitations, and fully feasting on the bread of life.

God gave us Jesus, the living bread, so we have faith and we have eternal life in him. Verse 40 says that for my Father's will, everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. In verse 47, I tell you the truth: he who believes has everlasting life. In verse 49, "Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died, but here is the bread that comes down from heaven which a man may eat and not die." Later in verse 56, whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.

Secondly, God offers us an ongoing relationship with God through Jesus, where eating his flesh and drinking his blood is a metaphor for our ongoing relationship with Jesus, the living bread. In eating the bread, we believe, and in sharing his body and blood, we have a relationship with Christ, with God, and with one another. We also extend Christ's invitation to the world so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Jesus says that he is not only from God but also the only way to God. (6.45-47)

In all these stories of God's people, there is the story of God, who feeds us, so we may have life. He revives our souls with the sacrifices of the body and blood of Jesus, not at all metaphorically, but literally, and it caused him pain; it has cost him his whole life. And He invites us to do the same.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in "An Altar in the World," says that if we are honest with ourselves, we all recognize pain, which is part of what it means to be living. She says the pain pushes people to the edge, causing them to ask fundamental questions such as "why this is happening" and "how it can be fixed." Pain brings out the best in people along with the worst—pain strips away all the illusions required to maintain the status quo. Pain begs for change, and when those in its grip find no release on earth, plenty look to heaven; she says pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy.

I have learned about the space between compassion and boundaries in the last few days. I did not even know this place existed until I was drawn to it. Then, I remembered that I had been here before and had been awakened again. I experienced fear, self-doubt, and even a sense of failure. I experienced pain. Sometimes, the physical bread seems like something easier to give. Sometimes, when it is being demanded of you, you see how it is not just a matter of giving it. There are a whole lot of layers and threads that are bundled together.

We had a couple camping on our porch early this week. Few of us have dealt with the man, and I am sure we all felt the pain I am talking about. It was unclear what he wanted from us; I was very clear about what I wanted. Somehow, we were stuck between a rock and a hard place between compassion and the boundary.

Elijah was still under the broom tree, where he was cared for, body and soul, and strengthened by the angel of the Lord. He had nowhere to turn to. He was still in between a rock and a hard place as he continued to flee from Jezebel's threats, but he was now a different person. He had experienced being touched by the angels. He was not heading towards the mountain of God called Horeb, fully convinced he was not alone.

Indeed, the only way that what Jesus said could make sense was after Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead. And maybe we are being invited to go to the cross in the story.

Yet, we are stuck in this in-between place. We stand with Jesus, seeing the same people who wanted to make him their King; between the twelve baskets of leftover lunch, their expectant eyes turned cold; their hands, eager to touch even his clock, covered their ears as he spoke of seeing the spiritual things. Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world,"

All week, I tried to learn where I could go next time this happened again. I gathered information, talked to a few people, and found ways to improve things. This experience awakened me to the pain that I was unaware of; it got me fastest to God.

Taylor suggests that pain can be just what we need. If we stay awake, pain remains a reliable "Alter in the world," a place to discover that life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. "The two never cancel each other out, she says, and I doubt they ever will, at least not until we, or all of us together, find the way through."

Epilogue

Elijah, John 6, and the man camping on our porch contributed to this reflection. And through them, God speaks first to me and hopefully to all of you about the desire of our God's heart. I referred to the pain in the sermon, which may cause some of you to be concerned. Thanks!! Some might find them too heavy for Sunday morning. (I apologize.) I think homelessness and issues of poverty and mental illness are extremely difficult but so prevalent issues in our society, even in an affluent suburb such as Albany. And all our different responses to these issues and people being caught up in this, behind or underneath all of them, if we are honest, we will recognize that there is an aching in our hearts.

How do we explain this pang in our hearts? I decided to name them and that with the word, 'pain.' I could have called it 'compassion' or 'empathy.' But I felt it was much stronger and more personal than that. Whatever we want to call it, I think a pain is involved. This is how I imagine God is feeling when we suffer. Pain is a gift that awakens us, like the bread that fed Elijah and Jesus, the living bread; it invites us to respond with a prayer and a change. God calls us to live in hope, to believe that we will all together find the way through.