

Bread and Silence

For the last two weeks, we have focused on the way in which God provides physical and spiritual abundance for God's people. Looking at the two miracle stories which open the sixth chapter of the Gospel According to John, we considered what it looks like when the creative power of God takes human form and walks among us, what it looks like when the Word becomes Flesh. In the presence of Jesus, miracles happen: miracles that release us from selfishness and make abundance possible, miracles that release us from fear and make love possible. In the presence of Jesus, we can be sure that all are fed, that all are safe, that all are loved. Physical needs are met and spiritual needs are met. The Beloved Community comes to fruition. Last week, as we heard the Exodus story of God's provision of manna and quail alongside Jesus' proclamation of his own identity as the Bread of Life, we considered how God's people can become selfish and greedy even in the presence of abundance, again both physical and spiritual. We were reminded of how we have answered the call to generosity in the past and how we must continue to be faithful in sharing all that we have to offer, both our physical assets and the spiritual assets of joy and love that have so characterized this congregation for over fifty-four years.

This morning, we have heard more of the Bread of Life teachings of Jesus, this time paired with a story of Elijah, the great Man of God who stands in the transfiguration stories of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as the representation of the Prophets just as Moses serves as the symbol of the Law. Once again, we are reminded that the writers of the Gospels saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, a phrase used to mean all of the Scriptures in those days. One overarching theme continues to be the revelation of Jesus as "God With Us," Immanuel, but there are other themes in today's pairing to consider as well. Today, we'll consider the link between abundance and sufficiency as it occurs in these stories. We'll also look at what happens when the revelation of God to us is not what we expect. And finally, the question will be, can we hear God in the silence?

We'll begin in I Kings. The prophet Elijah is in trouble. He has defeated the priests of Baal in a contest of "Whose God is More Powerful" and in doing so has awakened both the faith of the people of Israel in Yahweh and the enmity of the queen of Israel, Jezebel. Jezebel has the courtesy to send a messenger to Elijah warning him that she will have him killed on the morrow if she can find him. Elijah, no fool, leaves town and flees; first to the neighboring kingdom of Judah and the city of Beersheba, then out into the wilderness. Safe from Jezebel but exhausted by his sudden reversal of fortune, he collapses under a large, scrubby shrub and tells God he is giving up. "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

God, apparently, has other plans for Elijah, for the next thing he knows he is being prodded awake by an angel bearing a simple meal. Elijah eats the bread and drinks the water and promptly falls asleep again. Sounds like me on Sundays after church. Some time later, the angel rouses him again and urges him again to eat. Again, it is the same meagre diet. This time, however, Elijah is so energized that he walks for forty days and nights to Mount Horeb without eating anything more.

This seems at first to be a very different story than that of Jesus feeding the five thousand. There is no celebratory atmosphere here, no provision of an abundance of food so that there are baskets of leftovers. Yet the plot is similar: having received miraculous food from the hand of God (or

Bread and Silence

God's messenger), the people of God or man of God are filled, their physical needs are met. We also have a sense that in both cases the spirits of those who are physically fed are also encouraged. The people whom Jesus fed wanted that experience again enough to jump in boats and follow him across the lake. Elijah gets up and walks for the highly symbolic forty days and nights. The presence of God is sought in both cases.

In reading this story of a traveler fueled for a long journey by a simple meal, I thought of one of my favorite books, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. In that great modern saga, the Fellowship of the Ring are likewise gifted by servants of the Creator with food that grants energy beyond normal expectations. It is lembas, elf-bread. As they receive the gift, the friends are told, "Eat little at a time, and only at need. For these things are given to serve you when all else fails. The cakes will keep sweet for many many days, if they are unbroken and left in their leaf-wrappings, as we have brought them. One will keep a traveler on his feet for a day of long labour..." Frodo and Sam in particular are nourished by the lembas for a good deal of their journey into Mordor.

I suspect that Tolkien would be pleased to have his creation remembered in this context. A devout Catholic, he leaves clues throughout his works that his Middle-Earth is ruled over by the One he knew as the Father of Jesus Christ. I read this past week of an interview Tolkien gave to an Evangelical scholar in which he revealed that when Gandalf faces off against the Balrog and proclaims himself "a servant of the Secret Fire," he is saying in the idiom of Middle-Earth that he is a servant of the Holy Spirit. Is it any wonder that readers like me, always watchful for the ways in which Tolkien celebrated our Loving Creator in his work, associate lembas with the various miraculous breads of the Bible?

More to the point, perhaps, is a phrase attributed to another Englishman who contributed to the mythology of England, the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Malory. Malory is credited in another context with writing, "Enough Is as Good as a feast," which seems a perfect epigraph for this Elijah story. Sometimes, what God provides for us is not an abundance but it is sufficient. Sometimes, it seems, God gives us just enough energy, just enough hope, just enough faith to get through. As the anonymous eighteenth century writer wrote in the classic hymn, "How Firm a Foundation": "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, (God's) grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply..." Enough is as good as a feast. By the way, that phrase was picked up by yet another English writer of fantasies, P.L. Travers, and given to her magical protagonist, Mary Poppins. But I digress...

Sometimes, God delivers abundance. Sometimes, God delivers sufficiency. As Isaiah reminds us in yet another invitation by God for humankind to abundant life, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD." And that is why God does not always answer our prayers in the way we expect. God does not always give us what we want. God *does* always give us what we truly need. But God does not always reveal Godself to us in the ways we imagine God will. For me, this is part of the lesson of the latter section of this morning's reading from I Kings. Elijah, propelled by the miraculous feeding, takes himself off to Mount Horeb to encounter God. And, indeed, God is made manifest, but not in the way that Elijah expects. Elijah, apparently, expects God to reveal Godself in magnificent power, just as God was revealed in glory to Moses on the mountaintop and to the Israelites in the pillar of cloud and

Bread and Silence

the pillar of fire. “(God) said (to Elijah), “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire...” Throughout the Bible, God continually upsets the expectations of God’s people. God’s ways are not our ways. It is a good reminder to us to stay humble, for we do not know what God knows. It is a good reminder to us to stay alert, for God will keep surprising us with God’s grace, if we watch.

Propelled by another miraculous feeding, the crowd fed by Jesus take themselves off to Capernaum for another encounter with the miracle worker. They expect to be fed again. They expect to see the one whom they would make king. But this time, he offers to feed them with himself. He has already refused to be their king; now, he offers to be their sacrifice. Who does this guy think he is? The locals know him, know his family. He continues to subvert their expectations. Does he continue to subvert our expectations? Does he, too, remind us to stay humble? Does he, too, remind us to stay alert? God is not what we expect for God does not come in power and in might but as a “still, small voice.” God does not ride into town on a white charger to accept the offer of temporal power. God slips into town on an old fishing boat and offers to die for us. We only understand when we walk in the way that God has told us: doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly with God.

In the experience of Elijah, God comes, as our New Revised Standard Version translates it, in “a sound of sheer silence.” As I already alluded, I grew up hearing this in the King James Version as “a still, small voice.” From what I can tell (and unfortunately, our resident Hebrew scholar wasn’t available for consultation), “a still, small voice” is a pretty good translation. Other translations include, “a thin, quiet sound,” “a gentle breeze,” “a whistling of a gentle air,” “the sound of a low whisper,” and variants on these themes. None of these are descriptions that we might automatically associate with an appearance of God. They are a wonderful reminder of how God refuses to conform to the images we create of God.

The NRSV translation, “a sound of sheer silence,” leads me to some other thoughts. For one thing, if God is to be experienced as silence, found in silence, how good are we at preparing ourselves for the encounter with God? How often do we find ourselves in real silence? How often do we deliberately avoid silence, filling even our time alone with music or the sound of the television? It is nearly impossible in a modern city to find true silence, the kind that Elijah would have experienced on the mountain after the wind, after the earthquake, after the fire, when even the animals would have been hushed and the wind still. But how often do we explore even the imperfect silence around us, allowing the hiss of cars to become white noise and the murmur of voices around us to recede from our consciousness? Looking back in our story from John 6, we know that Jesus, as he often did, withdrew from the crowd, withdrew even from his disciples. One gets the sense that, had they not spotted him, he would have gladly walked across the sea to Capernaum alone, meeting the disciples come morning. Should we not learn something from the spiritual practices of the Messiah? Should we not spend more time in silence, seeking God?

The other question that comes to me when I think of “a sound of sheer silence,” is whether we can maintain our faith when even God seems silent. Is this a valid way of interpreting I Kings

Bread and Silence

19:12? Did Elijah go to the mountain seeking God only to hear...nothing? Did he then, as Shakespeare put it, “screw (his) courage to the sticking place,” head back to civilization and do as best he knew how what God had originally called him to do? I think of the revelations of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, famously published after her death that spoke of her 40-year experience of the absence of God the silence of God. “As for me,” she wrote to a friend, “the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear. The tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak.”

Some took advantage of these cries of a wounded heart to label her a fraud or a hypocrite. But isn't the faith and courage to press onward on the Jesus Way without any sign or awareness of God's presence actually a deeper faith than most of us would be able to muster? Isn't this real trust, the kind we so glibly name in that definition of faith as “walking to the end of all the light we have and taking one more step?” What if one walks to the end of the light and keeps going year after lonely year, trusting that the unseen, unheard God is still there, just out of reach but ready to catch us if we fall, subtly guiding us in ways we cannot perceive?

Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day... Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever...” Jesus saw the Father; we do not. Yet we are called to trust, for if we do, we eat of the Bread of Life and live.

God acts on us in ways we cannot understand. The Holy Spirit, which dwells in us, prompts our spirits to respond. We may remain blissfully unaware or we may struggle and fret but as long as we trust God to guide our paths, as long as we take Jesus as our model of life, trusting him to show us the way, we will live abundantly. God's grace will be sufficient. In silence or in overwhelming experience, in ways we would never expect, Christ will be our Bread of Life, feeding us so that we have the power to respond to his call. Whether we stream with radiance or fight the night fears, God continues to provide. Whether we are relaxed and full on the hillside or drenched and frightened in our little boat, God continues to provide. Whatever our lot, God has taught us to say, “It is well; it is well with my soul.” Thanks be to God!