

“Arise and Eat”

*And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said,
“Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you” (I Kings 19:7).*

The Bible is a story. It is a unified and harmonious whole written by many authors in a variety of literary styles, but it has one distinctly divine purpose and that is to save dying people. It is filled with accounts of God’s provision and promises. In poetry and prose, through historical narrative and divine mandate, every word of Scripture forms a single story pointing us to a God who loves the whole world and desires that all would be saved, and the thread that connects every word of this Holy Story is Jesus.

It’s important to understand this fundamental truth because sometimes it doesn’t feel that way. For instance, today’s reading from I Kings is part of a comprehensive record of the rulers of Israel and Judah, and, with just a few exceptions, these books describe the failures of these kings and the story of God’s prophets who were called to speak to them. The prophet who epitomizes this divine office as much as any other was the prophet Elijah, and today’s text details one of the most dramatic scenes from Elijah’s life.

In the chapters leading up to this section of I Kings, Elijah had confronted Israel’s King Ahab. Under the influence of his pagan wife Jezebel, Ahab had completely abandoned God’s Word, and, in its place, he had established a blasphemous culture of idolatry in Israel. In I Kings 16, we are told, “In the 38th year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab...began to reign over Israel...And Ahab...did evil in the eyes of the Lord, more than all who were before him...Ahab did more to provoke the Lord the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (I Kings 16:29-30, 33).

In a list of horrible kings, Ahab was the worst. He had rejected God, he had led God’s people astray, and, as a punishment for Ahab’s repeated and willful sin, God had brought a horrible drought on the land. In the third year of the drought, God tells Elijah to confront Ahab and his false prophets, and what follows is Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal. When I was a kid, this was one of my favorite Sunday school lessons and it started with Elijah gathering all the people of Israel on Mount Carmel where he said to them: “‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.’ And all the people answered, ‘It is well spoken’” (I Kings 18:21-24).

When the contest began, the prophets of Baal prepared their altar and laid the pieces of the sacrifice on the dry wood. They prayed and danced and called to their god; they even cut themselves with swords “until” we are told, “the blood gushed out” of them, all in the hopes that their god would answer the challenge. This went on all day and nothing happened. So, Elijah called the people to him, prepared the altar for sacrifice, and then ordered that the dry wood be soaked with water. Then Elijah prayed: “Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

And, we are told, that immediately, “the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, (and) the wood, (and) the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.’ And Elijah said to them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.’ And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook...and slaughtered them there” (I Kings 18:37-40). And, as a divine affirmation of this great victory, the rain returned to Israel.

What a day! Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal, the hearts of the people had seemingly turned back to the Lord, and the drought had come to an end. You would think that Elijah would've been on top of the world, and it must have seemed clear to him that the people would now return to God for good, and that Ahab and Jezebel would repent of their idolatry and tear down the altars and destroy their idols...but nothing could have been further from the truth. And that's where today's text begins.

Instead of a change of heart, when Ahab told his wife what Elijah had done, she issued a death warrant for God's prophet. And, in a move that stands in stark contrast to his courageous victory over the false prophets of Baal, Elijah runs for his life in fear. To me, this is where the story gets real because, we can all relate to this place of frustration, and we can all remember times when we felt like we'd kept the faith and done what God had required, but instead of restoration and peace, we found ourselves alone and afraid. This is where we find Elijah as our text unfolds. He has fled as far from Israel as he could, he's left his servant in Beersheba and continued into the desert by himself where he falls in the shade of a gnarly broom tree and finally says to God: "Enough is enough. I am done. Take away my life." Elijah then lay down to sleep, and, as he closed his eyes, he must have wondered if the Lord would answer his desperate prayer. But instead of bringing death, God comes with life.

"And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat'" (I Kings 19:5). And, my friends, this is where we see the thread. *This is where Christ comes!* You see, in verse seven, we are told that the Angel appears again, but this time, the Angel is not some random, unnamed messenger from God. The text is careful to identify this Angel as "The Angel of the Lord." This unique phrase points to a definite being who appears throughout the Old Testament as *an Angel who is more than an angel*. This one and only Angel of the Lord is the same Angel of the Lord who appeared to Hagar in the desert with the divine promise of protection; and it's the same Angel of the Lord who called to Abraham from heaven and stopped him from slaughtering his son Isaac; and it's the very same Angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, calling Himself "Yahweh" – the very of name of God – "I AM WHO I AM" (Genesis 16:7; 22:11; Exodus 3:14).

I know that this is a mind-blowing idea if you've never heard it before, but my friends, this is Christ! This is exactly what John meant in the first chapter of his Gospel where he writes, "No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). And it's this very same Angel of the Lord who speaks in today's Gospel reading where He says to you, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty... For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (John 6:35, 38-40).

My friends, this is the unifying thread in the story of salvation. It is always Christ who comes. It is always Christ who feeds. And it is always Christ who saves. And just as the Angel of the Lord spoke to Elijah, today, He speaks to us and says, "the journey is too great for you" (I Kings 19:7) and then He feeds us with Living Bread. When the world breaks down, when our best efforts can't make things better, when we feel alone and afraid and we don't know if we can go on, the Lord comes to us and He feeds us for the journey, and in His perfect presence, we will live. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold