

Proper 14, Year B  
1 Kings 19: 4-8  
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Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

Food for the Journey:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Do you know the story of Elijah—Elijah the Tishbite? Legend has it he wore of belt of leather around his waist and was clad in animal hair. Elijah the Tishbite—prophet of God. A prophet whose call for a drought in the land of the faithless came to pass. A prophet who breathed life into the lungs of a widow's dead son. A prophet, who by the power of prayer alone, shamed and defeated 850 false prophets. A mighty prophet. A man at the height of his prophetic powers.

Do you know the story of Elijah—Elijah the Tishbite? A prophet at the top of his game. That's the man we meet today. Think of where we meet him—cowering under a solitary Broom tree. Elijah, the might mighty prophet of God, deep in despair, begging God to take him out of his misery, begging God to end it all.

What happened to the man who strutted his stuff in front of all those false prophets? What happened to the man who in his compassion for the widow who took him in when he was in distress prayed to God and then breathed life into her dead child?

Perhaps it was the words of Jezebel who promised Elijah she would see him dead within a day.

But that makes no sense. When we meet Elijah, the day has passed and he's still alive. When we meet Elijah, he's far from Jezebel's reign and power. When we meet Elijah, he's deep in the wilderness south of Beer-sheba—another land, another rule. Safe—one would think.

And yet we meet Elijah cowering in the shade of a single Broom tree—a man broken and in despair. A man at the end of his rope. A man suffering in a restless sleep

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appears. “Wake up, Elijah.” “Wake up and eat.” “Hot cakes fresh from the oven.” “Cool water for you to drink.”

He eats the cakes and drinks the water and falls back to sleep. But the angel isn't done with Elijah yet.

“Eat some more,” the angel says. “You'll need it for your journey.” “The way ahead is rough and the journey long.” “You need the bread for the journey ahead.” “Otherwise it will be too much for you.”

I think we all have Elijah moments in our lives—moments when we think we can't go on. Moments of deep despair. John of the Cross calls them “dark nights of the soul”—times

when our resources seem to run dry, times when it feels like God has abandoned us. Times when even the cells of our body cry out, “Enough already.”

Times when we shut down. Times when we close the doors to our heart. Times when we wonder, “Can we go on?”

Times when the answer to that question is “No—you can’t. You can’t go on. At least not by yourself.”

And then the angels of the Lord appear offering bread in the wilderness, food for the journey. A shoulder to lean on, hands to ease the burden, words of encouragement. The stuff of angels.

Every time I encounter this story of Elijah I find myself wondering, “Why was he so worried? He was far from harm’s way, far from the clutches of Jezebel.” I want to ask him, “What drives you to the depths of despair? Surely, you know that God is always there.” And then I step back and take another look at Elijah, and truth be told, myself as well.

I suspect Elijah was quite taken with himself. After all in a mere three years he had come out of nowhere and called down a drought on the land of Israel, seen to it that an almost empty larder was continually replenished, breathed life in the lungs of a dead boy, and single-handedly shamed and defeated and killed an army of prophets. Elijah the Tishbite—the penultimate prophet.

Then that penultimate prophet hears the threat of Jezebel—“So may the gods do to me if I do not make your life like one of them by this time tomorrow” and he gets scared. He flees for his life. By the time he reaches the wilderness south of Beer-sheba, he has no strength left. No resources to rely on. Or so he thinks. You see, Elijah thought it was up to him. He forgot—he forgot he was a prophet of God. He forgot that God spoke through him and God worked through him. Elijah was not in it by himself. But Elijah forgot something else as well—he forgot the angels. He forgot the angels who, early in his ministry, came to him as ravens and who fed him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening. And he forgot the angel who brought him water to drink and a morsel of bread.

I feel a certain kinship with that prophet Elijah. A kinship in the moments of despair. A kinship in those moments when I think it’s up to me. And a kinship in the moments when the angels meet me on the way and give me bread for the journey ahead.

Every time I encounter this story of Elijah, I find myself remembering a poem I once read in the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer. It’s by Edward Carpenter. He calls it “The Lake of Beauty.” I’d like to share it with you and with Elijah as well.

Let your mind be quiet, realising the beauty of the world,  
and the immense, the boundless treasures that it holds in store.

All that you have within you, all that your heart desires,  
all that your Nature so specially fits you for – that or the  
counterpart of it waits embedded in the great Whole, for you.  
It will surely come to you.

Yet equally surely not one moment before its appointed time  
will it come. All your crying and fever and reaching out of  
hands will make no difference.

Therefore do not begin that game at all.

Do not recklessly spill the waters of your mind  
in this direction and in that,  
less you become like a spring lost and  
dissipated in the desert.

But draw them together into a little compass, and hold them  
still, so still;

And let them become clear, so clear – so limpid, so mirror-like;  
at last the mountains and the sky shall glass themselves in  
peaceful beauty,  
and the antelope shall descend to drink and to gaze at her  
reflected image, and the lion to quench his thirst,  
and Love himself shall come and bend over and catch his  
own likeness in you.