

Sunday September 10, 2023
Lesson 2: Being the Messenger of God
Scripture: 1Kings 19: 1-12

Context:

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” This first unit is titled “Food,” with several lessons of how God’s providence is in the physical refreshments we receive. Today’s lesson comes from the book of First Kings, one of the history books to tell the story of the Israelites and God’s work during the time of the monarchy and the prophets. The focus of today’s lesson will be to recognize the ways God provides even when we lose hope.

Chapter nineteen of First Kings is a continuation of the story of the prophet Elijah. Elijah was an open critic of the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The culmination comes in a showdown in chapter eighteen as there is a contest of Yahweh versus the prophets of the god Baal. The winner is Yahweh as fire pours down from the heavens consuming the altar after the prophets of Baal could not bring about the power of their god. In accordance with this climax, the people fall down to confess Yahweh is God and the prophets of Baal are slaughtered in accordance with Deuteronomistic principles to offset Jezebel’s murder of the Yahweh prophets.¹ The battle is thought to be won with Yahweh ruling and Elijah being uplifted.

Yet Jezebel is given the news by her wayward husband and Elijah goes on the run. Being a prophet carries its own occupational hazards. What follows in chapter nineteen is a story of Elijah’s burnout and recommissioning, a typical prophetic call narrative.² After Elijah makes the flight in Beersheba to leave his assistant, he goes to the wilderness, a place for him to be alone and in this case, to complain to God.

Mysteriously though, an unnamed messenger appears to him with food and then the counsel to nap. After a nap, the messenger feeds Elijah again and then encourages to go on his way. Elijah continues a pilgrimage for forty days and nights until he arrives at Horeb, a holy mountain. There in a cave Elijah receives a theophany where God commands him to stand before the mountain. There is a wind, an earthquake, a fire, and then a thin, quiet sound. The following verses recount a recommissioning of sorts where God speaks to the burned-out prophet.

This narrative has been explored by many different commentators, particularly the theophany (God’s appearance). The narrative explores how God’s call functions amid human despair and addresses the exiles of any age.³ God refuses to give up on those God calls and God

¹ Richard Nelson, “First and Second Kings.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 119.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

³ *Ibid.*, 129.

will not allow the prophet's despair to overwhelm him. God induces Elijah to get back to work by giving him more to do.⁴ Yet our focus today is on how God feeds him to do so.

Application

I once heard someone remark God uses this passage to teach us about the power of naps and eating snacks. While a simple interpretation, I find it equally valid as if you boil down the text, this is essentially what happens. Elijah naps and eats with a little show on the side. God works in small and yet tremendous ways.

What perhaps is more important is how God provides for Elijah when he loses hope. The text is clear on how Elijah's very life is threatened. He has indeed won the battle against the prophets of Baal yet as a result, his life is on the line with an angry queen and her army on the lookout. Before Elijah can lose hope completely, God sends a messenger to literally feed him and encourage him to rest.

The other day I had a colleague comment on how ministry was going well and yet they also felt themselves cruising to burn out and running out of fuel due to all the wonderful things God was leading them to do. At the counsel of another colleague, they delegated one of their tasks to have other clergy assist in a particular worship ministry and they commented it was the best decision they could make. They too needed to be "fed" and have their souls nurtured.

Upon reflection of their realization of what they needed, I thought about their wisdom in seeing how they too needed to "be fed" so they do not lose themselves completely. All humans need something to fuel themselves, so burnout and despair do not creep into their souls. Fortunately for us, God also wants us to be fed and to rest, just as God does with the prophet Elijah.

Even as a people of faith, I have found our souls can be individually and collectively drained especially in the world we live in. We hopefully do not have angry Queens roaming for our heads and yet we have our own things which drain us. There are people who never seem to be happy. Our cars decide to play tricks on us after we have gotten them repaired. We turn on the news and then must turn it off lest we want to receive a headache. Our to-do lists, particularly in the fall, seem to grow with the start of a new school year. All of us have things which flood our soul, potentially overwhelming us, or at least making us despair just a bit.

I hope as we read today's text though, we might read of how God does seek to feed us when we are hopeless, giving us some kind of sign to help us feel fed. Perhaps it is actually taking a nap. Or making our favorite snack. Maybe it is even sitting quietly just to feel our bodies and all the things taking place within us. Like Elijah, we need to go to the place where we can sit and be, praying for the Holy Spirit to remind us of how we are called and loved.

Once I had a spiritual director helping me in the aftermath of my father's death to look for hope. I will admit certain times it was easier than others. As we neared All Saints' Sunday, she encouraged me to look for little signs from my Dad, perhaps in nature or things around me. With her counsel I did so and started seeing little things which connected me both to his memory as well as the goodness of the Lord. There were little bits of heaven sent my way to remind me of the hope we have in Jesus when all appears hopeless. God seeks to feed us and provides even

⁴ Ibid.

when hope and joy seem distant.

When was a time you felt hopeless and perhaps alone? Have you ever felt burnout like Elijah? What do you do to feed your soul in times of hopelessness or busyness? What signs or morsels does God give you to fill your soul? Why does God care so much for us?

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