

Middles

I Kings 19:4-8

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*A forward for the readers of this sermon:*

*I know many of you don't know me and do not have the benefit of knowing the cadence of my speech, but even so I hope that God's voice shines through and there's some new found delight in the promises and word of God. Also, please forgive my grammar.*

Before I begin, may I be straightforward about a couple things? I hope you said yes internally. First thing, sometimes I'm not long winded. Today will be one of those days. Second thing, I unabashedly exist in a world of geeky things and I'm going to make some references in what follows. With those items noted let's begin with a reading from I Kings Chapter 19 verses 4-8 found on page 326 of your pew Bibles. Let us listen together for the word of God.

(NRSV)

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. (The word of the Lord//Thanks be to God)

Here we begin, in a middle, or at least what might feel to us like a middle. Before this moment Elijah called on the name of the Lord and a soaking wet pyre of wood was immediately consumed in flame before the people of Israel and then he put the prophets of Baal to the sword. An amazing moment to be sure, God's immediate and undeniable intervention, powerful, terrifying. Followed by quite a bit of killing. Only further to be followed by the first rain after a terrible drought and of course Elijah putting to shame not only Usain Bolt, but the horse drawn chariot of Ahab, King over Israel. As word reached Jezebel of Elijah's deeds the prophet's life was again in danger and that's where we find him, fleeing the wrath of the monarchy of Israel.

After our text today, not that Elijah's aware of it yet, Elijah will meet with God on the same mountain on which God met Moses. God's appearance during this meeting will not be in fire, nor gale force wind, nor earthquake, but instead in the stillness, in sheer silence.

And yet, from the lectionary for today Elijah resides in the in between. Elijah is in between God's prophetic call and a world deadly intent on not listening. Elijah is in between a miracle

offering God's people a clear directive and a miracle offering Elijah a clear directive. Elijah is in between, he's in a middle.

For us this is the heart of the drama. Like sands through the hourglass these are the days of Elijah. He's just shown the people of God a great miracle and done away with the religious charlatans, and the people who cared about this miracle are not intent on repentance but rather intent on doing away with him. So what's he going to do? This is the part of the movie that has us on the edge, wanting to know how the story will end. This is the Empire Strikes Back after the rebel base on the ice planet Hoth is destroyed. This is the Princess Bride with Wesley mostly dead. This is Helms deep with a scant few warriors barring the doors of the citadel. This is Harry Potter after Severus completed the task given to Malfoy. This is Avengers after Thanos' snap. It's gripping and thrilling, but mostly because if we don't already know the end of the story, we know there's more story. There are pages left to turn and there's film yet to roll.

But for Elijah, from Elijah's perspective, he believes he's at the end and for all he knows he's right. He cries out, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Despair, probable ruin, and hopelessness these are Elijah's companions in this moment.

Have these, despair, ruin, and hopelessness, ever been your companions? What was the date when you realized this COVID thing might be set to overwhelm you? When was it you found the end of your rope, figuratively or literally? How did it feel to know you'd run out of time for that assignment, scheduled interview, or mortgage payment? Where do the odds feel insurmountable, depression, racism, climate change, reclaiming the value of fact and truth and reality and community? A quick heads up: I'm going to ask two more questions with just a subtle difference in tense, sense of time. With that weight stacked against you did you feel like you were in a middle? With this weight stacked against you do you feel like you're in a middle? Some of us are in these places right now and if you are, I'm so sorry, that sucks, and I hope I can assure you there's someone out there or in here who wants to help if we can.

Elijah's in a middle. He's in between, but he doesn't know it. And then, God shows up. God shows up, not once but twice by the power of God's angels. God meets with Elijah and despair and ruin and hopelessness and God feeds them all and bids them rest. Not once, but twice. God put's two more quarters into Elijah's story and clicks start to continue. And once sated and rested Elijah stands again and walks, forty days, to Mount Horeb.

The lectionary for today, I feel, is rather heavy handed in making a cross canonical echo. The lectionary cuts out this very small piece of a much larger Elijah narrative which continues through the end of chapter 19 and pairs it with John chapter 6 where Jesus proclaims that he himself is the bread of life. Elijah too finds himself in a bread of life situation though somewhat more literally, but only somewhat. I think the paring of these texts, in part, is meant to bridge our attention from one of Israel's greatest prophets to Israel's greatest prophet. This pairing is

meant to draw our eyes cross-ward to recognize the hints of the Gospel in the Old Testament. In a very real way, our lives are a middle and we believe that there will come a day where we can find an end, when new creation will come and Jesus will reign. But the thing about middles is that they can often feel like ends and hope for a better end tastes stale, smells fake, and drips with the syrup that Hallmark pours over their movies.

Last week we heard a bit about impatient hope, about the prayers we pray from middles, the in between places. But before I go further can I tell you something I found interesting on the radio the other day? My wife and/or family might be laughing to themselves in this moment because this is a question I ask nearly every time we gather for dinner. I hope it's okay with you because I mostly meant the question, as I often do, rhetorically, because I want to share.

This was a story about microbiomes, particularly about the microbiomes of our homes, workplaces, hospitals and the effect on our bodies. For a little bit of scientific context, I will share briefly and roughly that a microbiome is focused on all the little things that live everywhere around us and on us like bacteria and viruses and stuff like that. Now, I won't bore you with all the details of bacteria and our use of wipes and sanitizer during this time of plague we call COVID, but this one snippet of the interview caught my attention and it had to do with bread and hands. So, bread and hands. This group of scientists ran an experiment on bakers of sourdough bread. They wanted to see if the bacteria on each individual baker's hands had an effect on the taste and quality of the bread. I know kinda gross. Now what they found I find fascinating. The microbiome of non-baker hands, for reference, don't normally contain microbes like yeast. However, even after washing their hands repeatedly the microbiome of a baker's hands does contain yeast. This means that their work with bread has changed, in a semi-permanent way, the makeup of what lives from, moment to moment, and day to day, and year to year, on their skin. Cool right?

So, I return again to impatient hope and prayers from the middles. There's good news in simply attending to this part of Elijah's story and praying those psalms. And I think it's a lot like bakers' hands. The more often we spend time in these places of kneading in God's word and our prayers, we begin to culture the yeast of the bread of life. I understand that I've made a kind of horrid Frankenstein's Monster of a metaphor here, but I'm quite serious.

It's the work of our liturgies, what we're doing here and now, that gets into our skin the story of God. So that when the middles, those in between places of our lives, show up we're ready to see them for what they are, we're ready to recognize that one way or another God will meet with us and grief and ruin and despair, and we're ready to be sated once again by God and rest in God's provision, we're ready for the work that brings the bread of life to us and our world so that when God asks us like God asks Elijah after 40 days of walking, "What are you doing here?" we can say we're baking, let your kingdom come.

All this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.