

## “Fed by God’s Own Hand”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 12, Proper 14, Lectionary 19

Texts: 1 Kings 19:4–8, John 6:35, 41–51

Preached: August 12, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who feeds every living thing, and from Christ Jesus, who is bread for the journey. AMEN

Have any of you been following the story the past few weeks about the mother orca and her calf? It was a touching and heartbreaking tale being played out in the world media. A young mother had given birth to a calf on July 25. This was the first live calf in this pod of 75 orcas in more than three years, so excitement was high among researchers. For some reason, perhaps related to climate change, nearly every baby in this pod off the coast of Washington State perishes. Sadly, though, within a half hour of birth, the calf had died. Scientists have no idea why. But then something extraordinary happened. The mother, named Tahlequah by those following her, refused to let her dead calf go to sink down into the ocean. Instead, she began to carry and push it on her head, following along with the rest of the pod as they journeyed for almost 1000 miles. It was a heavy burden. The calf weighed some 400 pounds of dead weight. It kept getting away from her, and so she would dive down under the water to raise it back up to the surface, laboriously making her way with her companions. She did this for 18 days, days during which she was starving because she could not stop to hunt for food. Scientists believe that the other orcas in the pod were probably feeding her, sharing their food with her. Finally, last evening, she lay her burden down, freeing herself to return to living more fully with her community.

Now, we do have to be cautious about overly anthropomorphizing the behaviors of animals. But these orcas are enormously bright creatures, and frequently display behaviors that suggest that they experience emotions such as grief and joy. I think this story touched so many because it hit on our own experiences of loss, and of wanting to hold on, of desperately trying to sustain life in situations where hope has died, hoping against hope that if we just cling tighter, if we just try harder, we can fix things. But instead, we simply end up starving ourselves, spiritually and emotionally, and sometimes physically, in our focus on hanging on to our burden. It’s exhausting, isn’t it, this business of carrying a heavy burden? It consumes you, robs you of hope, robs you of community as you shut people out. Joy is gone, appetite is gone. You trudge along, stumbling under the burden, until at some point you just lie down, unable to take another step.

That was certainly what the prophet Elijah was dealing with in the story we heard a few moments ago. A little backstory: Elijah is the mightiest prophet in all of Israel. Israel has a new king, Ahab, who has married foreign women who have brought in the worship of their ancestral gods. Chief among them is Jezebel, who has built temples and altars to Baal and Asherah. Elijah has taken on the heavy burden of combatting the spread of this worship of other gods, going so far as to stage a dramatic demonstration of the power of the God of Israel in a competition with the prophets of Baal, at the end of which he rouses the crowd to rise up and slaughter all the priests of Baal. When word of it reaches Jezebel, she sends a messenger to Elijah, with the threatening words, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of those prophets by this time tomorrow.” So, Elijah leaves everything behind and flees out into the desert, panicked, frightened, and discouraged...and hungry. The burden is too much for him. He says, “Enough of this!” and lies down in exhaustion and defeat, under the shade of a broom tree, and simply asks God to take away his life.

But God has a different idea. Instead, God sends God’s own messenger, an angel, to wake Elijah, not to warn him or threaten him, not to make him feel guilty because he has fled from the task God has for him to do, but rather to touch him on the shoulder and tell him to get up and eat and drink the bread and water that God has provided. It’s an act of tender compassion and care. But it still wasn’t enough, and Elijah lies back down and drifts back off to sleep. So the angel comes a second time, again bringing bread and water, and urges Elijah to eat and drink, lest the journey that lay ahead of him be too hard for him to bear. That journey, we learn later, is to Mount Horeb, the holy mountain of God where Elijah will encounter God directly in a very powerful way. It was at Mount Horeb that Moses had encountered God face to face, and was given the Ten Commandments. It was there that the people of Israel witnessed God’s power, and from there they began their march directly toward Canaan. But what matters in the moment is that God feeds Elijah in his time of distress, providing for him and sustaining him in the work that must be done, preparing him for the journey that remains to be traveled. God wants Elijah to taste and see God’s goodness, and wants to equip him for the long journey toward meeting and knowing God more directly. God wants to feed him. He is fed so he can journey to do what must be done.

Over these weeks, we've been hearing about bread and feeding over and over again. Throughout these scriptures, there seems to be a very close association between eating bread, "the staff of life," and being transformed. Eating is not just eating. Yes, the bread that the people eat sustains them and satisfies their hunger. But God's feeding is not simply to keep our bodily organism alive. God's feeding is more purposeful than that. When God feeds us, it's with the goal of preparing us to go on a journey. And the goal of the journey is to find wholeness, healing, and transformation through an encounter with the Living God. The crowd that ate the bread and fish went looking for more—but what they were journeying to find was not simply more of the bread that had filled their empty stomachs. What they were looking for was a transformational experience with God that would fill the "God-sized hole" that exists in each of us.

The journey to fill that longing to know God fully can be exhausting, and the things that burden us can make us simply want to lie down and give up along the way, to fall into exhausted, dreamless sleep. We feel isolated and alone, our hands grasping onto what we have known and loved, unable to recognize the path God is calling us down, or too discouraged and frightened to step out once more into the journey. And that is when God sends messengers to feed us.

Those messengers come in different forms. Sometimes they come as strangers. Sometimes they come as friends or loved ones. Sometimes they come to us in the community of faith. I was particularly struck in the story of Tahlequah that the scientists believe that she was fed along that 1000-mile journey by her sisters and brothers in the pod, who saw her grief, who knew the heavy burden she was carrying, and in their own act of compassion and love brought her food and shared it with her, giving her strength in the middle of her grieving so that she could journey on with the pod.

And for us as followers of Jesus, as ones who trust him, we are also fed and sustained at this Table, where week after week I break the loaf, and declare to you that this ordinary bread is somehow the very Bread of Life, sent down from heaven to mysteriously feed you and satisfy your hungers, and that this cup of ordinary wine is the Cup of Heaven, filled and offered to you so you can quench your thirst. Jesus makes the audacious claim to be bread that feeds us for eternal life. When we eat this bread, it is as though we take it from Jesus' own hand, as he touches us and bids us to get up to eat and drink, because there's a journey we need to take. This is the place to lay our burdens down, if only for a moment, a place to rest in the shade of God's shelter, a place to breathe deeply, a place to open our mouths and to take into them the food that Christ gives, which is himself. Taste and smell the yeasty bread. Let the sweetness of the wine remind you of the sweetness of God's mercy and grace. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

This food and drink is for you, broken and poured out so that you can be nourished and satisfied, and so you might be transformed in the eating and drinking. But this food and drink is not only for you. It is given so you can go out of these doors, back onto your journey toward wholeness, back out with renewed strength for the work you are called to do in the world, sent out with living bread to share with those you encounter so they can also be strengthened and fed. Go out from this place ready to share your bread. As you continue your journey, stop and look around you. Who are the ones struggling under a heavy burden, who are the ones starving for food, for companionship, for release from their burden? Break off a portion of what you have received and share the life-giving bread you've been given. Open your hand as though it is God's own hand, and feed the hungry in body and soul. There's plenty of bread for all, showered down by God's own hand to feed God's people. Thanks be to God. AMEN