

## **"Running from God"**

**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - 8/12/18 - I Kings 19:4-8, John 6:35, 41-51**

**One of the sweetest things I get to do as a pastor** is to visit folks who are no longer able to come to worship. Last week, I went visited a man who I have known many years, and when I entered the room, his back was to me. "It's Pastor Susan..." but when I came around to look at him I could see in a moment that this time, he didn't recognize me. "I've brought communion, would you like that?" His response, "that will be nice..." As memory fails, conversation reduces, and he could only have about three exchanges that made sense and then would ask, "Who are you, again?" So I began to prepare communion. As I was setting out the hosts and the little wine cups he asked what I was doing. "Setting up communion." "Oh, that would be nice," said he. I said the words, he remembered every bit of the Lord's Prayer, and then I said, "the body of Christ, given for you." "Set that on the table, I'll have it later," said he. Same with the wine. "Later, he said." Then he asked for some water, which I gave him. It was clear that later meant never, so I said, "I'll take this for you..." Holy Communion, done. Not an orthodox distribution of the sacrament, but the sacrament all the same, for, one thing I know for sure, *it all depends on the context.*

**Today we enter into the Old Testament** and hear a story about Elijah, the Super-Prophet and miracle worker of the Hebrew scriptures. You may remember him providing miraculous food for a widow and her son, or his raising that very same boy from the dead. Or you may recall his famous ride into heaven on a chariot of fire. But perhaps his biggest triumph was the Miracle on Mt. Carmel - a glorious competition between God and Baal in which each prophet called upon his god to send fire to light up their own altars. The resulting threats from Queen Jezebel, whose prophets he debunked as fire rained down upon the altar of God, sent Elijah fleeing into the wilderness afraid for his very life. In our reading we come upon him, sitting under a broom tree complaining to God, *"I might as well DIE! I am no better than my ancestors."* (Remember Jonah who was so angry that God forgave Nineveh, that **he** sat under a large bush and complained that **he** might as well DIE?) Apparently fear or things not going as you had hoped have never been easy situations for us. Sometimes, we just wanna run away. Sometimes we want to run from people; sometimes we want to run from God. Often, we want to run where there is no one and nothing, into the wilderness, for example.

Victoria Lynn Garvey suggests that is because wilderness is different. *Even one's identity is different in the wilderness - old familiar patterns are no more, recognizable borders are nonexistent; and no one else is there to help define who one is, or of what one is capable.*

So, what I'd like to think about together today is this: "How do we respond when those around us are in wilderness? When memory fails, or a familiar way of life unravels? When no one's left there to define your role, or to tell you, you can do it! When life's struggles seem to overwhelm life's peace, who are we? How can we change the context of a response to time in the wilderness?

**Well, how does God respond to our cries of frustration or pain?** Today, there's an Angel/messenger/presence of God who says to Elijah, gently, *"Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you."* This is God as a good mom urging, *"Honey, you have to eat something to keep up your strength."* Nourishment will be necessary for the 40 day journey Elijah is to take toward an appointment with God at Mt. Horeb.

We know that life is full of ups and downs - even for the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Some of you out there, know the feeling...You might be sitting out there right now, under a broom tree, thinking, *"I'm done,"* just as God is preparing to feed you, calling you to "get up and eat" with your family, at this table.

Last Sunday, I spoke about the heavenly manna being symbolic of the relationship with God. Jesus used the great I AM sayings as symbols as well, snapshots of familiar things that would help people find a way to understand God in their particular circumstance or context:

I AM the Light of the World...to shine in your darkest times

I AM the Gate... to show you the way out, when you're lost

I AM the Vine... to connect you to strength, when you have none

I AM the Door... to show you the way **in** to presence of God

Whatever or however you need God to be, that's what GOD IS. Asian Bibles even translate Jesus to say, *I am the rice of life*. Context. Being with Jesus is Bread: daily nourishment to the world, from heaven. Your Greek for the Week makes a connection that we don't see in English. The Greek word for bread, "artos" (ἄρτος) is a derivative. From the word, "airo" (αἶρω) which means, to raise. So even bread has an underlying understanding of resurrection. According to William Loader, *"Eternal Life" is John's favorite way of describing salvation and it means sharing in God's life*.

So what's our part of this deal? Is grace simply, ***We Need, God Gives?*** Seems like a pretty one-sided transaction (and we don't like receiving...) But whether we are running **to** God or running **from** God we will all wind up in the wilderness at one time or another. Elijah's story challenges us to see how God is present in our journey as he shows us how to bring all our emotions to God, who is present in different ways on different parts of the road. Context: Fed by God, Elijah journeyed 40 days to where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There, he encountered God - not in wind, tempest, or wilderness, but in the sound of a still, small voice of sheer silence.

**Theologian Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable about ducks.** *One Sunday, the ducks went waddling off to duck church. The duck preacher spoke eloquently - God has given ducks wings with which to fly! He encouraged them telling them there is nowhere they couldn't go, and inspired them because they could soar. Shouts of "Amen!" quacked through the duck church. Afterwards, the ducks all talked about message and waddled back home. But they never flew.*

Now, some see this as a parable about untapped potential; I say, "It's all about the context." Someday, there will be a need for them to fly - and together, and fed by God, they will mount up and do just that.

As Christians, you are Elijah, a prophet who speaks God's word to power. And doing God's work--being God's voice--can be exhausting. But just as Elijah, Jonah, Paul and each of us will find -

There is nowhere to run from God's providing.

There is no place where angels will not find you and feed you,

There is no wilderness where the promise of God's love for you does not reach.

We are here to do that work. Amen.

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**Resources:** Garrett Galvin, *Working Preacher*; 8.8.18 Pastors' Text Study; Victoria Lynn Garvey for "Sunday's Coming" in *The Christian Century*; William Loader for *TextWeek*