



SAINT LUKE'S

“UNDER THE BROOM TREE”

PROPER 14B

1 KINGS 19:4-8

PSALM 34:1-8

EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2

JOHN 6:35,41-51

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Today I would like to start with Elijah in the desert. If you have ever been to the Middle Eastern desert, you know what it is like. Something that surprised me when I went there a few years ago, is how close it is to “civilization”. You can find yourself deep in the desert a couple of miles from a major city (like Jerusalem). So if Elijah has already gone a day’s journey from Beersheba, deep in the southern Judean desert, he is many miles into the wilderness. Water is life. Shade is life. Elijah’s lone broom tree is the only good news in his desert.

Wilderness in the Bible usually signifies both physical *and* interior landscape, especially for a solitary person. Elijah is desolate. Elijah has just prevailed over the 450 prophets of the god Ba’al. In a spectacular display of fire, all 450 Ba’al prophets perish – we might think this is cause for rejoicing.¹ But the current Queen, Jezebel, was born in Phoenicia where Ba’al is the reigning deity. Jezebel’s name literally means “where Ba’al is dominion” in Ugaritic. Queen Jezebel is furious that her god loses, and is coming after Elijah to kill him. So Elijah is afraid, running away into the desert. He is depressed. He curls up under the broom tree. The angel – messenger of God – wakes Elijah in the middle of his total funk. *Eat!* And then *eat again!* *Eat twice or the journey will be too much for you.* After eating the food God provides, Elijah is able to get up and continue on to Horeb (Sinai), which is indeed a long journey – 40 days and 40 nights – a symbolic number in Hebrew tradition and a metaphor for “a long time”. And it is in the cave at Horeb that Elijah hears God in the still, small voice.²

¹ 1 Kings 18:20f

² 1 Kings 19:12

Jesus' followers are also promised food from heaven, not just today but forever – in the person of Jesus. *I am the Bread of Life*. Today's gospel is part of John's unique Bread of Life discourse. What we instinctively do when we hear Jesus say "Bread of Life" is think: Eucharist. We think: Jesus is pointing forward to his Institution of the Eucharist. But in John's gospel, Jesus isn't. In John's gospel, unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke,³ the Eucharist isn't mentioned as part of the Last Supper. John gives us the foot-washing.⁴ John's Last Supper isn't even a Passover meal; there is no blessing over bread and wine.

So when Jesus says in John's gospel today: *I am the Bread of Life*, although *we* connect it to the Eucharist, that is not what Jesus is doing. The Bread of Life is not a Passover meal around the family table in a settled community. Jesus connects bread of life to something much older - manna in the wilderness. Jesus connects living bread to the Israelites' journey of suffering in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Jesus is God's food in terrible times and places. Jesus is God's provision in a desperate struggle for survival for a homeless, wandering people under the merciless desert sun.

As we hear and sing today about the Bread of Life, it is appropriate for us as Christians to think: Eucharist; but try also to see much further back, behind the Eucharist, as Jesus does. All the way back to the desert and our spiritual ancestors with no home of their own, no land of their own, barely knowing the name of their God, stumbling along. Think as Jesus does of God's manna, so that our ancestors could find strength to

³ Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20

⁴ John 13:1-11

journey on.

We know about wilderness journeys. For many of us it may feel as though America is a people in the wilderness right now. On this anniversary of the Charlottesville violence, we know how deeply the sin of racism runs in our country. Unlike the Hebrew people in the wilderness, we may have thought we were close to the Promised Land, or even in it already, yet we find other idols are rising: nationalism, white supremacy, misogyny. We thought the tower of Babel¹ was in ruins, but it is being rebuilt. The tower of confused speech, abuse of God's gift of language, alternative facts, and domineering empire. We see alternative gods lifted high, Ba'al-like gods. Yet as these idols rise, they are also being exposed. As always, the true God is always working to undermine idolatry and lies and restore God's kingdom, the true Promised Land. We have to choose each day how we can and will participate in God's work of restoring people to community through compassion, forgiveness, generosity and kindness.

What about you and me? Elijah's angel, God's messenger, speaks truth. *Eat – or the journey will be too much for you.* Eat twice. Feed your body and your soul. Too often, people only feed their bodies in 21st century America. Don't we all know how that feels? Full stomach, empty soul? Shiny tech, desolate heart? We might have tried to fill the emptiness, where God wants to live in us, with spiritual junk food – candy – with the latest whatever – clothes, clubs, apartments, tweets, drama-rama.

⁵ Genesis 11:1-9

In our time, as in every age, Jesus is God's food in the wilderness. The church is our broom tree, where we gather in shade and shelter, to hear and receive Jesus. This is where we can safely bring our despair, our hunger, our fear, our anxiety that the journey is too much for us. This is where God reaches out to us: always has, always will. Take and eat. Feed body and soul. This is where God's Law is practiced: Grace and forgiveness. Kindness and compassion. Truth not lies. You are loved, and you do not have to compete for that love. Receive the bread of life. Eat and be refreshed for the journey that awaits you this week. And next week, invite a friend who you know is in the wilderness to share this oasis.

AMEN

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