

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 7, Year C, RCL

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“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of Elijah the Tishbite is an epic that is full of intrigue and action. It would make a pretty good movie. It is unfortunate that we are only treated to bits and pieces in the Sunday readings. The episode we heard this morning comes near the end.

The time is the middle of the ninth century before Christ. The Kingdom of David has been divided for about fifty years into the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom, called Judah. The king Ahab—yes this is the one for whom the obsessed captain in *Moby Dick* is named—came to the throne of Israel. His wife was Jezebel, who was not an Israelite but a Canaanite. She worshiped Baal, the fertility God of the sky. Ahab abandoned the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and supported the worship of Baal instead. Jezebel instituted a policy of eradicating the worship of Yahweh and killing the prophets of Yahweh. (In fact throughout the story of Ahab and Jezebel, it seems that Jezebel is the stronger personality. We saw last week, that when Ahab was moping because Naboth would not sell Ahab his vineyard, Jezebel took strong action to solve the problem by having Naboth murdered.) In opposition to this policy of substituting the worship of Baal for the worship of Yahweh, Elijah comes to Ahab and says, “There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” It was during this drought that Elijah moved to Zarephath and was given a room by the widow whom he had saved from starvation. This is the same widow whose son died, and Elijah raised from the dead. After three years of drought, the Lord told Elijah to return to Ahab to announce the end of the drought even though there is not a cloud in the sky.

Elijah calls the people of Israel together on Mt. Carmel and challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. The 450 prophets of Baal are to build an altar and put wood and an animal sacrifice on it, and Elijah the sole prophet of Yahweh will build another altar and place wood and a sacrifice on it. Then each side is to call on their God and whichever God sends down fire from heaven to ignite the sacrifice is the true God, and the people will then follow the true God. The prophets of Baal try real hard, chanting and dancing and even slashing themselves with knives. Elijah jeers at them. "Maybe you should call louder, perhaps Baal is asleep. Or maybe he's on vacation." Having tried all day, they give up. When it is Elijah's turn, he goes so far as to pour water all over the wood three times, just to make it even harder. Then Elijah prays to the Lord, and immediately, fire comes down out the absolutely clear blue sky and consumes the offering, the wood, the altar, and all the water. Elijah yells to the crowd to seize the prophets of Baal, and they were all executed at the river Kishon. Elijah tells Ahab to go home and eat and drink because the rain is coming. And it does.

When Jezebel hears that all her prophets have been killed, she puts out a contract on Elijah. And Elijah seems to lose his nerve. The man who fearlessly confronted the king and 450 prophets of Baal runs like a dog with its tail between its legs. And this where we pick up the story this morning. Elijah runs into the dessert for a day and then collapses. He has run out of energy, out of resources. He has nothing left and is ready to die. Then an angel wakes him up and gives him food and drink. He goes back to sleep, and a second time the angel wakes him up and gives him food and drink saying, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." This nourishment from God is powerful enough to keep Elijah going for forty days until he comes to Mt. Horeb, which may be another name for Sinai. In any case, it is regarded as the Mountain of God. There he meets God. But God is not in the big noisy phenomena like wind, or

fire, or earthquakes, but in the silence. And God asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?” And Elijah says, “I have been fighting for your true religion, and I am now hunted by the queen. I am the only one left in Israel who is still true to you.” And God says, “Go on back to Damascus in Syria, the kingdom to the north of Israel.” Our reading this morning stops there, but God actually goes on to say that actually there are seven thousand in Israel who have not bent the knee to Baal. He is not so alone as he thought. And he is to anoint the man who will overthrow the current king of Syria. He is to anoint the man will overthrow Ahab and Jezebel. And he is to anoint Elisha to be the next prophet in Elijah’s place. And next week we will see the end of Elijah’s story and the beginning of Elisha’s.

But what are we to make of all this? Certainly, many of us have experienced God’s presence in times of silence and quiet rather than in times of great noise or mighty events. Much has been made of Elijah’s need to be spiritually re-charged in the holy place, and rightly so. However, I want to back up and look at the earlier encounter when he is out in the dessert, exhausted from fleeing from Jezebel.

First of all we notice the extreme vacillations in Elijah’s mood. Yet many of us have experienced an emotional let down after a great success. On Mount Carmel he is full of confidence in God’s power to prevail over the prophets of Baal. He wins a mighty victory in his fight to restore the worship of the true God to the land of Israel. Suddenly, he is fleeing for his life. All his chutzpah is gone. He expects to die in the dessert. He has run out of steam. He has no resources left, physical or spiritual. He is used up. It is precisely when he has nothing left, that God provides what he needs. Not just to live, but to make the arduous journey to the mountain of God. So too, we, when we are at the end of our resources, often find God providing what we need, not merely to survive, but to make the journey to a deeper relationship with God. And the

sooner we recognize that our resources are inadequate and turn to God for help, the sooner we will get that help. “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” God provides, yet we have to do something ourselves. “Don’t just lie there and die; get up and eat.”

The other thing we notice is that when we get to the mountain of God, and we experience God’s presence, we often find that our understanding of the situation was far more bleak than the reality. There are potential friends, allies, resources, and options that we could not see before. “There are seven thousand who have not bent the knee to Baal.”

Frank Griswold, the former Presiding Bishop, tells a story from the time when he was bishop of Chicago. He had celebrated at the institution of a priest as the new rector of a large parish. Six weeks later the priest makes an appointment to come and talk to him.

“Bishop, I think I may have to resign the parish,” he says. “The whole parish is against me.”

Bishop Griswold asks him to elaborate. “Well, we just had a difficult discussion in the Vestry...” the priest begins.

The bishop interrupts and asks, “Wait. How many members are there in the congregation?”

“About four hundred.”

“And how many are on the Vestry?”

“Fourteen.”

“So we have gone from 400 to fourteen who are opposed to you. Please continue.”

“So in the Vestry meeting, the two wardens brought up their concern.”

“So now we have gone from fourteen to two people who are against you. Is that correct?”

“Well, yes, I guess so.”

“Do you think you can have a constructive conversation with these two leaders in your parish, who by the way were very recently very excited and happy about your coming to the parish?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

So God tells Elijah that, far from being the only one left who worships the Lord, there are seven thousand. We rarely know how many friends we have.

Furthermore, God will send us back with more to do. Elijah is sent back to anoint the next king of Syria, the next King of Israel, and the next prophet to follow him. He has to prepare for three different successions. In the Gospel this morning, the man whom Jesus delivered from demon possession, is sent back to proclaim God’s goodness and power.

So whatever our struggles, conflicts, or dangers, we learn from the prophet’s example that God will give us what we need to keep going. We learn that we can find God in the place of profound silence. And we will be shown what our next steps are to be. And today the word comes to each of us in whatever situation we find ourselves in our life, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Get up and eat.