

We Are Your Bread for the World
1 Kings 19:1-16
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Preface

We now enter the time of the Kings. We are not in Samuel any more. Solomon is dead and Israel has broken into the kingdoms of Judah in the south (where Jerusalem is) and Israel in the north. After a string of bad kings, we get the worst in Israel, Ahab and his Ba'al worshipping wife, whose name has become synonymous with evil, Jezebel. Immediately before today's passage, Elijah and God have won the GOD-off, a special-effects-laden battle between God and Ba'al, the false God of Jezebel's people. And Elijah has slain all of the priests of Ba'al, the minions of Queen Jezebel. Hear now, from 1 Kings 19:1-16, not 18. (Text was read.)

Even heroes have to eat. That was the thought in Christy Connell's mind on that terrifying day in 2007. We've all watched with great sadness the death and destruction from the Northern California wildfires last month. The last time California had a spate of fires like that, it was in southern California, during the 2007 drought when fires actually came into parts of the City of San Diego. One of those fires was called the Witch Fire, because it started in Witch Creek on October 21st. It burned until the 7th of November, eventually scorching just under 200,000 acres, destroying 1100 homes, killing two and injuring 40 firefighters. In all, more than 2,800 firefighters battled the blaze and literally saved San Diego.

Near one of the most dangerous areas for the firefighters, around the mountain town of Julian, steep terrain and explosive underbrush made the fight particularly treacherous and the teams were exhausted and hungry, and largely alone because everyone in the area had been evacuated. But Christy Connell decided not to leave. She owned the Julian Cafe and though she had no power, she did know how to make a lot of food fast and she had a lot of food that was going to rot without refrigeration. So she borrowed a propane cooker, set it up in the middle of a street and for a week, averaging 20 hours a day, she cooked for as many of those 2,800 firefighters as could get down the state highway for a few minutes of hearty food, a moments rest, and a kind word. Connell knew that even heroes have to eat.

Today in scripture we meet the hero, if there is one, in the divided kingdoms — Elijah the prophet, who is greater than any other. His biography is sprinkled throughout First Kings and he's an odd duck to be sure. He's moody, he's passionate, and he spends a lot of his time angry. But today we get the story of his moment of despair and his encounter with Yahweh. It's one of the signs of being a great prophet. Moses had a direct encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai, also called Mount Horeb. And, low and behold, today so does Elijah. But just how does it happen?

We start with Elijah on the run from what some have called Jezebel's "cursing vow" — "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make you as dead as you have made my prophets by this time tomorrow." Jezebel is never very subtle. The prophet first flees south out of Israel to Beer-sheba in Judah, out of the jurisdiction of Ahab and Jezebel. He leaves his servant in this safe place and continues alone another day, into the wilderness. And he gives up hope, asking to die. Instead, a messenger — the Hebrew word for angel — gives him food. Perhaps we should consider this first meal as God's resounding "No" to Elijah's request to die. And then God sends a messenger to feed him yet again. This time, it's not God's resounding "No" to his request to die, this time it is God's resounding "Go," as God sends Elijah to "Horeb, the mount of God."

Hmmm — miraculous food — remember manna? And the length of his journey — 40 days, not 40 years — but get it yet? And finally, arriving at Mount Horeb/Mount Sinai? In other words, Elijah re-enacts the Exodus of the Hebrew people hundreds of years before. While he is there on the mountain, morose Elijah, the weary hero, will have an existential crisis answering God's repeated question "What are you doing here?" He whines back an answer about how good a prophet he has been, and where has it gotten him? Now he has a price on his head! But God doesn't respond — just asks him again, "What are you doing here?" Elijah whines again and God's response is, yet again, "Go."

It's a wonderful renewal of a call story — a divine encounter with God that eventually breaks the prophet out of his self-pity and sends him back into the fray, back to be who he was made to be — the Prophet of Yahweh in a very hostile time.

I think we are a bit familiar with the concept of a very hostile time. The last two years have marked the deepest divides in our nation — since Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement threatened to tear the nation apart. We are in

need of some Elijahs, the heroes who will stand up to powers and principalities and call them out of tit-for-tat ranting, out of rhetoric and retaliation. And maybe some of us are called to be an Elijah. I don't know, it seems like a pretty thankless gig to me — you make everyone uncomfortable and maybe change happens and maybe the Jezebels and Ahabs just ruin your reputation and make your life hell.

But it doesn't change the fact that this story confirms for us that some people are called to that role. But — aren't some people also called to be the angel, the messenger, the one who brings the food to the prophet when death looms? Aren't some called to be those who deliver God's "No" to death and God's "Yes" to the prophetic calling? After all, heroes have to be fed — not simply food but, like Christy and those firefighters, someone needs to offer encouragement, rest and a kind word.

What if, even though there may be some Elijahs among us, our congregational calling is to be the ones who feed the Elijahs of today and tomorrow — feed them with compassion, with a gospel that gives meaning and power to their convictions, feed them with our continued commitment to seeking justice and giving hospitality to the stranger and the outcast? What if we are meant to be the ones who go out seeking the Elijahs who are weary and downcast under the broom tree, taking them sustenance, taking a word that affirms life and confronts death like the first feeding? And what if we are meant to be the ones who are also called to that second feeding — the one that provides the physical, emotional and spiritual energy that the Elijahs in our midst need in order to respond most faithfully to God's call for them (even "thems" among us) to "Go" out into the world as the Prophets our world so desperately needs?

On Mount Horeb/Mount Sinai, Elijah will have an encounter with the still small voice of God, a sound of sheer silence (the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls it) and we are fond in Biblical circles of calling it his encounter with God. But I want to disagree. Yes, that moment is transformative for Elijah but could it have happened without the food under the broom tree? Could it have happened if he had surrendered to the death-dealing fear and despair that had captured him until he was fed, not once, but twice?

Friends, the table is set for us this morning. It's a table set by the Christ who was God's ultimate "No" to death, God's ultimate "Go" to the Elijahs of the world. It's a table set as ever, not just for us but symbolically for all of those

prophets and angels who have gone before — angels like Marge and Jim and Etta Mae and Bob and Ann and Bill. It's a reminder that we will one day gather with them at the great banquet of eternity. But it is also food for us. It reminds us of God's "Yes" to life and justice and hope. It is perhaps the "Go" we need — a few of us perhaps — to be Elijahs. But most of us, I believe, are called to be the messengers, those who empower, prepare, nurture and feed the Elijahs whom God is raising in our midst.

In seminary our class on the Reformation's view of the Lord's Supper was called "Eucharist and Mission" because one always prepares us for the other. Jesus prepared the disciples in the upper room and prepares us here. Friends, the heroes and the messengers need to be fed. And Christ has set the table.

We are invited on this day to look back and give thanks for the prophets and the angels that God has placed in our path so far. But also to listen for God's call on all of us, individually and as a community, to order our lives and our commitments in such a way that we too — be we prophets or messengers — are freed to live the lives to which we have been called.

The heroes must be fed in this hour at the table set by Christ. But in the hours and days and, yes even in the year that will follow — in our encounters with more than a few prophets downstairs at the Mission Fair, but also in the lives we lead each day — the heroes must be fed. And the responsibility is ours to carry good news — good nourishing food of hope, of love, of peace — of God's eternal "Yes" to life.

May God give us the strength and the joy to be, in all we say and do, Christ's loving food for the world. Amen.