

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 13, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: 1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Elijah is one of my favorite persons from the Old Testament. I can relate to Elijah. His stories make a lot of sense to me because I have experienced some of the same types of things. I can especially relate to the story of Elijah under the broom tree, being waited on by angels.

The events leading up to Elijah there under the broom tree include his confrontations with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. These confrontations culminated in a big showdown with the prophets of Baal. When the prophets of Baal lost that showdown, Queen Jezebel was enraged and she vowed to have Elijah killed. Elijah thought that would be a good time to get out of town for a while. So he left, heading out into the wilderness, alone. Eventually, he simply has to stop to rest. He did his best, but now he is tired, he is worn out. He needs to rest, so he sits down under the broom tree, and falls asleep.

I have been there; and maybe you have been too. I have been going too long and too hard, until I just have to rest. I don't have anything more to give to anybody. What I like about Elijah's broom tree encounters is that it reminds us that, sooner or later, all of God's servants need a couple of things: rest and nourishment. And it reminds us that God does send angels.

Rest. God even gave us a commandment telling us to rest. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Years ago there were laws about what could and could not be sold on Sundays. Okay, so I'm old enough to remember when most places were closed on Sundays and nobody was selling anything. These days we act as if remembering the Sabbath is merely a suggestion, and not all that important. We live in a culture that rewards non-stop working and busy-ness. And I have been known to be one of the worst offenders. Though, as I get a little older and wiser, or maybe just older, I am finding I do rest more, if only because I can't keep going. God designed us to need rest, and we ignore that at our peril.

The second thing we all need is nourishment. The angel came and gave Elijah some cake to eat and water to drink. We are designed to need food and water. Sometimes that is physical food and water, other times it is spiritual food and water. And we need good food, not junk food. Good physical food and good spiritual food. There is plenty of spiritual junk food out there. I read an article about what happens to wild deer if they happen to find and eat human junk food, like chips and sweets. Apparently they quickly develop a taste for that kind of food and will stop eating grass and berries and the food they are meant to eat and start searching for junk food instead. Needless to say this is bad for their health and for the safety of everybody else. We are not so different, both in terms of physical food and spiritual food. It's just that we have nutrition guidelines to tell us what things are physical junk food.

Now, one other thing that I like about this story of Elijah under the broom tree is that he was fed twice. He fell asleep, was woken and fed, and then he slept some more, and was fed again. There is such a thing as enough rest, and enough nourishment. He couldn't go on until he had gotten enough of both.

God sends angels. Sometimes we can not make it on our own. Sometimes we need someone to help us through whatever trial we might be going through. And that is when God sends angels. They usually aren't wearing white robes or wings, but God sends them none-the-less.

I know this is so because I ended up having an Elijah under the broom tree sort of week this week. It all started Monday morning at about 6:30 a.m. when I got a call from the security company, saying that the Eriscon Hall alarm was going off. We had had a false alarm the Saturday before so I said I would go down and check it out. Well, this time it was not a false alarm. As I was walking around the building to see if there was any windows broken out, there was a guy coming out of the kitchen window he had broken in. He ran off. I called the police and thus began a really long day.

As best I could tell, he didn't get anything, this time. He had all kinds of stuff stacked up on the counter that looked like he was getting ready to haul away: unused cases of soft drinks, rolls of paper towels, the coffee maker. And the place was a mess. He had pulled stuff out of the cabinets, out of the frig, out of the closet. It was a mess. I was angry, I was indignant. It's not like we don't already give enough to this neighborhood. We had just had the biggest event we do all year, giving away school supplies to hundreds of kids in this neighborhood, and then this happens.

I started to think to myself, I can not call any members of this church to come down and help clean up this mess. Everyone was tired from all the Carnival work and it would just not go over well to have to turn around and come clean up after a break-in. I was going on about this for a little while until I realized that I was projecting. I was the one who was tired. I was the one who was upset over having to turn around and clean up after a break-in. I was the one who was feeling resentful. And that's when God sent some angels.

God sent angels in the form of the five women who use the pantry, who Linda asked to come over do the cleaning up and the police officer who came by to get fingerprints. As the officer went about dusting for prints I told him the details of what happened, and my feelings about it all were pretty obvious. And the police officer began saying to me the kinds of things I usually am saying to others. About how God sees what happens, about how I shouldn't let the actions of one bad apple spoil all the good we do for all the other people in our community. I probably wasn't quite done being angry at the guy, but I needed to hear those things.

Well, this guy was nothing if not tenacious; he ended up breaking in two more times in an effort to get all the things he was planned on taking that morning. And all of that is a long story so I won't go into the details here, except to say that God sent me more angels and something nutritious to eat the next day, in the form of my pastor colleagues. We get together once a month. We have a short Communion service together and then we talk, sharing about what is going on for us and giving one another mutual support. It really makes a difference to hear the person beside you praying for you and your situation. It makes a difference to hear yourself praying out loud, "forgive us our trespasses as we

forgive those who trespass against us.” It makes a difference when you sip the wine, from the cup of the new covenant. It made me have to pray for this guys redemption instead of for revenge. Needless to say, I came away from that worship time restored in a completely different kind of way.

The thing is, this kind of stuff happens to us all of the time. My own life is dotted with moments when just the right song came on the radio, when just the right friend called out of the blue to see how I was doing, when just the right message was part of the sermon somewhere.

No doubt, you have similar stories. If you had some time to think about it, you would probably be able to tell me of your own “Elijah under the broom tree” stories. I am often amazed, and a little amused, when people tell me how a sermon I preached spoke to them on a particular day. One person said recently, “Have you been reading my mail?” I truly believe that in the space between my mouth and your ears, the Holy Spirit prepares my words to be the food that you need that day.

You would be able to tell me stories of times when Communion was especially meaningful for you. And even Communion will mean different things to us at different times, because our needs will be different. One time, when Karen Roberts was assisting, and I had been having another particularly long week, I knelt down at the end of Communion to receive, and after she gave me the bread it was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud. She had given me a particularly large piece of bread, and afterwards when we were chuckling about it, she said, “oh, it’s not that I thought you needed lots of forgiveness or anything like that.” But I had laughed because I had knelt down thinking to my self and saying to God, I am going to need a lot of your nourishment, your rejuvenation, today. And about that time, Karen placed that extra large portion of bread in my hand.

So, I don’t know what you might have been needing this day. Maybe just the reminder that God does care for us, God does give us what we need, (though not necessarily what we think we want). Maybe the reminder that it is here, at this place of worship, this communion table that we receive the Word and Sacrament, the true bread that satisfies, and the true water that quenches our thirst. Maybe we just need to be reminded that it’s a little hard to receive God’s good gifts when we are on the run all the time, and eventually we will collapse from exhaustion. Far better to come and be renewed and restored with God’s good gifts. Maybe we just need to hear again the Good News that this Bread of Life, this Water of Salvation is freely given, not something we have to earn, but given by Jesus himself that we might have life. The table is ready, welcome to the feast. Amen.