

Proper 14B (Pentecost 10), 2009

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-8

Title: Elijah's Prayer

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Sometimes you've just had enough. Everything is going wrong. You have a bad day, a bad week, or sometimes even a bad year.

Things don't go well at work, and, as hard as you try you end up without a job.

All of sudden, out of the blue something goes wrong with your health, and before you know it you're in the hospital fighting for your life.

You're blindsided by death and disease. All around you you see fighting and violence. You see a world ravaged by sin and falling apart at the seams. Things are bad, and there's no sign that they're going to get better.

As hard as you try to fix things, straighten them out, get your life back on course, nothing works. All your efforts are in vain. Everything seems pointless. Why even try?

And eventually, you've had enough. You want out. You want to quit. You want to escape and be done with this world.

But you're a Christian. You're not supposed to feel this way. You're supposed to have faith and trust in God. You're supposed to be happy and cheerful and positive all the time.

So you put on your best face. You lie through your teeth and tell everyone that you're fine. You pretend that you're not bothered, that you're not worried, that you're not afraid of the future.

But inside of you is a different story. You have fears and frustrations. Some days you dread getting out of bed, because you're afraid that things can only get worse.

This was the situation for Elijah. Everything seemed to be going wrong.

Elijah had even defeated the prophets of Baal and showed everyone that the Lord was the only true God. He even had all the false prophets killed so that the country could get back on track. But it didn't work. The queen wanted Elijah dead and was determined to kill him.

Elijah felt hopeless and alone. He felt like a failure. He felt useless. Nothing that he had done seemed to work. What's the point in doing God's will if it only leads to your own death.

And so he ran away. Elijah ran south to the town of Beersheba, the last oasis in the south of Israel, the very last town before you were in the desert. When Elijah gets there, he leaves his servant at the Motel 6 in Beersheba and starts walking south into the desert.

He walks all day, with the sun beating down on him, with the burning hot sand under his feet. By the end of the day Elijah is exhausted. He has tried fighting. He has tried running away, but nothing seems to work. It's time to give up.

Elijah collapses under a broom tree. It's more of a shrub than a tree, a thin, scraggly, dried up little bush that barely gives enough shade for one man.

Elijah has given up. Elijah is done. And so, in the end, Elijah prays for death.

Elijah's prayer is not unusual. But we don't like to talk about it very much. We don't like to mention it, but it's not unusual at. Many people have prayed Elijah's prayer and asked the Lord for death.

People who have reached the end of their life, people who are battling with a chronic or terminal illness, people who are disabled and don't feel useful any more will sometimes pray for death.

They want the pain and suffering to end. They want to be with their loved ones who have already died. They feel like they are a burden on their loved ones and care-givers. They feel useless. And so they pray for death.

It's not just the old, the sick, and the dying who think this way. A disturbing number of teenagers and young adults feel like their life is not worth living. They feel isolated and alone. They feel unimportant and unloved. They feel like no one really understands them. They feel like they have no friends and that everyone is against them. And so they try to escape the pain by praying Elijah's prayer. "I have had enough Lord, I want to die."

Some seek to answer this prayer by helping other people to end their lives. "Physician-assisted suicide" is available in some places, where a doctor helps those who pray Elijah's prayer end their lives. If someone really wants to die, they should be able to make that choice, or so the logic goes.

But that's not the Lord's way of doing things. The Lord is the one who gives life, and your life is in His hands. It is not your choice to make to but an end to it. If you're still alive, it's because the Lord wants you to live and still has a use for you.

The Lord did not answer Elijah's prayer by letting him die or by speeding things up a bit. The Lord was not done with Elijah. Even though Elijah felt useless, the Lord still had a use for him.

The Lord sends His angel with food a drink for Elijah – freshly baked bread and cool, refreshing water. Not just once, but twice. Two helpings. Seconds.

The food and drink the Lord provided gave Elijah the strength to travel for forty days and forty nights through the desert.

Just as the Lord provided manna and water in the desert while the people of Israel wandered for forty years, now the Lord provides bread and water for Elijah and his journey in the opposite direction- from the promised land back to Sinai.

You can see the comparison, of course. When you are near the end, when you say to the Lord, "I've had enough," that's when the Lord comes to give you food for the journey.

The Lord did not give Elijah some sort of holy pep talk. He doesn't tell him to suck it up and be a man. He doesn't tell Elijah that his problems aren't real, or that he should have more faith, or to put a smile on because everything's going to be okay.

No, the Lord gives Elijah food and drink. He gives Elijah exactly what he needs for the journey ahead. He gives him food to strengthen him for the journey.

There's nothing like a good meal to pick you right up, to lift your spirits. In college I went on a camping trip with several of my friends. It was January, and went camping and hiking in the Smoky Mountains on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina.

For four days we cooked all of our food outdoors. We made lots of soups and stews, the kinds of food that warm you up and stick to your ribs. Everything tasted okay, but we were eating outside in the mountains in the winter. It was hard to relax and enjoy the meal. You felt better after you ate, but you were never completely satisfied.

But camp food is never the same as a good hearty meal. At the end of our trip, before heading back home, we stopped at the Burning Bush restaurant in Gatlinburg, TN for their famous "Bountiful Breakfast". You begin with eggs and your choice of meat- bacon, sausage, ham, pork chops, steak, or my choice- rainbow trout. The meal includes all you can eat biscuits and gravy, country fried potatoes, cinnamon apples and grits. It was incredible.

A meal like that can change you. With a stomach full of good food, your whole attitude changes. You're content and satisfied. You're calm and relaxed. Nothing lifts your spirits like a good meal.

The food the Lord gave to Elijah was enough to keep him going for forty days and forty nights, all the way to Sinai. The food changed Elijah's spirits, too. The food gave him the spiritual and the emotional strength he needed to give it one more chance, to try again one more time.

Once Elijah is at Sinai, the Lord speaks to him and gives him something more to do. He is to anoint two kings and a prophet. Elijah is not long for this world, and so the Lord uses him to prepare the next generation of leaders.

The Lord still had a use for Elijah, and he still has a use of you. As useless as you feel and as hopeless as you think things are, the Lord still has a use for you. It may be like Elijah. It might be time for you to help prepare the next generation of leaders for God's people. Whatever it is, as long as you are still alive, the Lord still has a use for you.

You will have bad days. You will have horrid, awful, terrible days. Some days you will feel like Elijah. You will say to the Lord, "I've have enough, take my life." Being a Christian doesn't mean that you'll have days like these. In fact, it's because we have these days that we need the Lord the most.

If we lived in a perfect world, and nothing ever went wrong, and we were happy and carefree, then we wouldn't need Jesus. We'd be fine on our own.

It's precisely because of the bad days, because of the hopeless we feel, that we need Jesus all the more.

We need the food that only He can provide. We need the food, just like Elijah received, to be able to try one more time, to get up, to continue the journey, and to find out what the Lord has for us to do next.

Jesus provides this food for us. Jesus says, "I am the bread come down from heaven." Jesus gives us the bread of life- himself- to strengthen us for what lies ahead each day. We eat this bread of life as we hear Jesus' word, as He speaks to us and strengthens our faith, giving us life and hope. We feed on Jesus as we eat His body and drink His blood in the Lord's Supper.

This place is an oasis in the wilderness, a place to eat and to drink, to rest and be refreshed. You leave this place strengthened for whatever lies ahead, for whatever the Lord has left for you to do.

When you feel like Elijah, when you feel hopeless and useless, when you want to give up, call it quits and even when you pray for death, that's when the Lord comes to you with His food, the bread of life.