

## Sermon: Pentecost 12B August 11, 2024

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Texts: 1Kgs 19:4-8, Eph. 4:24-5:2, Jn 6:35, 41-51

Near the end of *The Shadow of the Sun*, his wonderful book about Africa, the writer Ryszard Kapucinski has a chapter entitled, "In the Shade of a Tree, in Africa." In that chapter the author describes a solitary mango tree in a village in Ethiopia. Its large, eternally green branches are a stark contrast to the bare, almost lunar landscape all around. Kapucinski says that wherever you find a great tree, you will find a village, a community of people. And **under** that tree, you will find **life**. The tree provides the shade human beings need to survive the burning heat, a schoolroom where a piece of paper pinned to the tree can teach the alphabet, a conference room where people assemble to make decisions and render judgments, a gathering place where people tell stories to keep their history and culture alive and offer each other solace against the dark. Were lightning to strike down that tree, Kapucinski says, the community **itself** would disappear.

Today's story from 1 Kings tells what happened to the prophet **Elijah** under a tree, a solitary broom tree. Elijah **should** have been crowing with satisfaction after God bested the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. But instead, Elijah suddenly felt small and spent, vulnerable and afraid. He found himself pursued by the army of Queen Jezebel, who was devoted to the god Baal and angry about having herself, her priests, and her god humiliated. So Elijah ran...but not very far...into the wilderness. His energy depleted, his will to live nearly gone, he sat down under a broom tree and asked to die.

Why sit under the broom tree? Was Elijah hot and out of breath and in need of shade and rest? **Or** was the tree God's **messenger**, calling Elijah to stop so that God might have a word with him...because it's **awfully** hard to have a conversation with a man on the run?!

**Whatever** made Elijah stop and sit, his stay under the tree was blessed by God. It became the place from which God fed Elijah with bread and water, with strength and courage, with love and promise. And though no paper was pinned to the tree, God **did teach** Elijah there. Although no one **else** was gathered there, Elijah was reminded of the saving history of God's steadfast presence and care for his ancestors who ate manna in the wilderness. Though Elijah collapsed under the tree asking to die, God renewed his spirit **and** his body, so he could live, so he could go **on**.

God's provisions were simple but sufficient: a warm loaf of bread and a jar of cool water. An angel woke him and said, "Get up and eat." And, **despite** his depression and despair, Elijah ate and drank. But then he lay down **again**. Because it just was too much: the knowledge that even if he survived and returned to his prophetic role, things probably wouldn't improve. Monarchs would resist, false prophets would continue to arise, and God's victories were likely to bring not affirmation but attack and require Elijah to speak words nobody wanted to hear. It was too much...best just to sleep away his life until death took him.

But the angel woke Elijah a **second** time, touching him and saying, "Get up and eat." And **this** time the angel gave a reason: "Otherwise the journey will be too much for you." The message from God **wasn't** "Elijah, you're exaggerating. Things aren't so bad!" No, God **agreed** with Elijah; things **were** difficult, things **were** dangerous. Therefore, it was necessary and good – or as the old Communion liturgy put it, "indeed right and salutary," that is, **good for your health**, spiritual and physical, to eat and to drink...for the journey ahead **would** be long and difficult. So Elijah is called to eat **twice**, to eat **all** that God had placed before him...to **clean his plate**, if you will! And lo and behold, that simple meal proves sufficient to take him 40 days and nights to God's holy mountain. **This** part of the story reminds me of a verse from Psalm 34, which describes an angel of God encamping around those who revere God and rescuing them. The Hebrew words, more than the English, portray the angel as very active, not just holding the line, but rather equipping and invigorating those in the camp to do battle. In the **same** way, the angel sent to Elijah doesn't just bring food to keep him from going hungry but also **invigorates** him, stirs him up to continue on the prophetic path of divine truth-telling and confrontation to which God had called him.

How **God** accomplishes this is different than **we** might have done it. You or I might have been inclined to give Elijah a good talking-to and a kick in the rear; we might have told him to quit complaining and get back to work. **God**, however, leads Elijah back to life step by step. Alice Walker wrote that at such moments, "wisdom requests a pause." In 1 Kings we find God who **is** Wisdom filling that pause with what Elijah needs to be refreshed and reinvigorated, so he can resume his ministry for God.

Jesus **also** has a word and a pause for **us** today, as we meet him in the gospel, where week by week, he continues to show us one more dimension of the "bread of life." **Today** we hear Jesus say that those who eat the bread **he** gives will

live forever. **Then** he tells us this bread is his own **body**, given for the life of the world. What's more, when we eat **this** bread, we participate in the very life of God, a life that nothing, not even death, can destroy, a life that now lives in **us**.

We know this and trust this because we know that Jesus **himself** walked no easy road. Like the prophets before him, he was threatened with death...and, unlike Elijah's enemies, **his** enemies **made good** on that threat. When he was crucified and died, it seemed very clear that he wouldn't be walking on in life. That led his disciples to sit down under whatever tree they could find and refuse to go on, because, like Elijah, they reasoned there was no point. What lay ahead was only more danger, more trouble, and disappointment.

But the tree the **disciples** sat under was no **ordinary** tree: it was the tree of the **cross** which became the tree of **life**. **None** of the gospels ends with marvelous, miraculous feats of faith and discipleship. They end, instead, with a call for disciples to get up and walk on to meet Jesus again as for the very first time, to pause and be fed by him by the lakeside or at the Emmaus table by his own hand and with his own body, so they might be strengthened and renewed for faith and life, for doing the works of God and proclaiming the **peace** of God to a world weary of its own evil and dying of self-inflicted wounds.

Today **you and I** have come to sit in the shade of **our** singular and solitary tree – the tree of life, which overlooks the table God has prepared for us in the midst of whatever wilderness we find ourselves. Some of us have come weary or worried. Some of us have come protesting, "I will **not** go on; it's too hard to follow Jesus." It's too **much** to speak the truth, to forgive, to live in love, all those qualities of God's **own** life that Jesus calls us to imitate. Yet to **all** of us, as to Elijah, God offers not a scolding, but a gentle invitation, "Get up and eat, lest the journey prove too much for you." Today again Christ offers us the very bread of heaven, **himself**, under bread and wine, food that can feed us now and forever. To all of us, as to Elijah, God answers not with accusations that we're exaggerating the hard work of discipleship, but rather with compassion for how overwhelmed we often feel when we take our faith seriously. To all of us, God speaks a gentle reminder that our value to God is not in our mighty deeds or our many deeds or in our effort to live scrupulously, without making a mistake. **Our** value and redemption come from God, from the love of God graciously poured out for us in Jesus even before we know how to ask for it. When God feeds us, as God does again today, under the tree of the cross, it is not a **reward** we have earned but a **blessing** God freely gives because God **loves** us.

So let us eat and drink eagerly today. Let us clean our plates heaped high with grace! Let us taste and see how good the Lord is! Let us pause and allow God to feed us so we **can** take the next step of those ventures to which we have been called but – as the old Vespers prayer says – “ventures of which we cannot see the ending.” **If** we do, **when** we do, we will indeed find that it will be enough...indeed, it will be **everything**, the sign of God’s love, the seal of God’s presence, and the pledge of our share in God’s abundant life...forever and ever. Amen.