

20 March 2024
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“40 for Life - Elijah: Food for Life”
Text: 1 Kings 19:1-8; John 6:25-35

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

40 days and 40 nights.

40 days and 40 nights Elijah walked. 40 days and 40 nights of looking back over his shoulder, wondering if Jezebel and her soldiers were catching up to him. 40 days and 40 nights Elijah went, until he reached Horeb, the mount of God. The mount where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The mount where Moses spent his own 40 days and 40 nights, as God spoke to him and established His covenant with Israel. Now where God would speak to Elijah. A 40 day and 40 night trek for Elijah, from death to life.

Elijah's story is important for us. And, honestly, a bit puzzling. He had just finished one of the greatest prophetic victories of all time, defeating the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. It was a great show of God's power, and all Israel was there to witness it. The 450 prophets of Baal doing everything they could think of to get Baal to do something, *anything*, for them. But even after all their theatrics, their altar and sacrifice remained untouched. While Elijah did everything he could to *prevent* his sacrifice from being consumed, drenching it and all the wood on the altar in water three times, until there was *no way* it could burn. Until it did. Until the ***fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.***

But rather than being filled with boldness and confidence, Elijah fled. The queen, Jezebel, did not appreciate him killing all the prophets of her god, and so pledged to kill him. She would exact her revenge. But rather than defying her and being confident in the power of the Lord to protect him, Elijah was filled with fear and fled for his life.

Puzzling, yes? Until you realize that it is not miracles or great shows of power that give us faith. Oh, that's what we always want, isn't it? Show me a sign, God. Do a miracle, God. How often do those requests - nay, demands - sound forth not just in our day and age, but throughout the Bible? But while signs and miracles awe people and strike fear in people, they do not produce faith in people. Sometimes after great demonstrations of His power, especially over the demons, the people are so fearful of Jesus that they don't believe in Him, they ask Him to leave. So while we think Elijah should have been filled with boldness and confidence because of what just happened, and Jezebel should have

been filled with fear, that's just not the way it is. For faith, we need something else. For faith, we need the word and promises - and food - of God.

So that is what God provides. Elijah flees into the wilderness and wants to die. But God is not going to take Elijah's life. In fact, Elijah will *never* die! God is going to take him to heaven in a whirlwind! But not yet. So now, He feeds His fearful and fleeing prophet. He's going to feed him *twice* actually. Now, in the wilderness, he provides him food and drink - food and drink which sustains him and strengthens him for 40 days and 40 nights of travel! But at the end of those 40 days God will feed him again, at Mount Horeb, with His Word. And as great as the food was that sustained and strengthened Elijah for 40 days and 40 nights, even greater was the food of God's Word, which gave him the faith and the strength to return to Israel and take up the fight for God again. The Word of God - not the miracles and signs - was the food that gave him the faith he needed to go on.

And so it is for us as well. Signs and wonders may be cool, but it is the Word of God that gives faith. That is the food we need, and the food Jesus talks of in John chapter 6, as we heard tonight. That chapter is Jesus' catechesis of the people after He fed the multitude of over 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Cool sign, right?! And the people followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee because they wanted more of the same. But when Jesus tries to teach them about the greater food that He has come to provide them, ***food that endures to eternal life***, the people ask for . . . wait for it . . . *for a sign! What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?* Hadn't Jesus just done that? But signs and miracles do not produce faith. They needed, and we need, something more.

And that *more* is what Jesus has not only come to provide, but is. For ***the Father gives the true bread from heaven***. It was the Father who gave the manna in the wilderness and it is the Father giving them bread in the wilderness now again. But now, not the bread of free food like manna, but *the bread that is Jesus*. ***I am the bread of life***, Jesus says. And just as it was with Elijah for 40 days and 40 nights after he ate, so it is with Jesus: ***whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst***.

So Jesus teaches and feeds. Food for body and soul. He is always concerned with both, not just one or the other. He neglects neither for He created both. And both is who we are. So He cares for and feeds both. Food for body and soul. Fed *by* and *with* the bread that comes down from heaven. Fed *by* and *with* Jesus. And fed *by* and *with* Him, we have the food that endures to eternal life.

That's why for us it is always Word and Sacrament - not one or the other, but both. Always both. For Jesus is both. He is the Word of God made flesh, and the Body and Blood that is fed to us in the Supper. He is the one who speaks to us in the Scriptures, and the one they speak of. He is the one who feeds us, who hosts us at His table, and the one who is the meal on the table. And as we eat this bread through our ears and in our

mouths, we have the food that endures to eternal life. That food for our journey from death to life, however many days or years that journey may take for us.

So what happens here is not the wild, the weird, and the spectacular, but the solid and steadfast Word of the Lord giving faith to weary pilgrims, traveling through the wilderness of this world. Strengthening us for the journey through this life to the next. Forgiving our sins and sending us back out into a world which, like Jezebel, hates us and what we do and wants to get rid of us. For we only get in their way. Yes! Exactly. For when you are going the wrong way, you need to be turned around. When you keep chasing after the wrong things, the things of this world, you need to repent and be reoriented. To come back to the Word which gives life. Back to the Word that feeds. Back to the Word that is the bread from heaven.

So this Lenten season. A season of fasting, of prayer, of almsgiving, of discipline. It gets in the way! Stops us. Turns us from what we were doing to a better way. Back to Jesus in repentance. Back to Jesus in faith. Back to Jesus as we pray, ***Sir, give us this bread always.*** And He is most happy to do so. Listen. Chew. Swallow. Repeat. And live. And as you do, never be truly hungry or thirsty again.

So Noah, Moses, Israel, Jonah, and Elijah. 40 days, 40 nights, 40 years, from death to life. God working for us and for our salvation. So do not fear the Jezebels of this world. Do not fear the journeys you will undergo. For the Lord is with you. And *He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:6). To Him be all the glory.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.