

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B -- August 12, 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8 Ephesians 4:30-5:2 John 6:41-51

It's said that the Old Testament prefigures the New, and that the New fulfills the Old. But understanding the connections requires some understanding of Bible history and interpretation. Take the Book of Kings. When we met Elijah this evening/morning he's fleeing for his life. He's exhausted, depressed, and at the end of his rope! Taking refuge under a broom tree he cries out -- *Enough O LORD! Take my life!* It's clear enough that Elijah is desperate! But these few verses don't tell the whole story. They skip important events leading to Elijah's desperation. As it turns out, Elijah is at the center of a war for religious freedom. And it's not just a war of words and rhetoric. It's blood war that engages prophets, kings, and the notorious Queen Jezebel.

Some 2900 years ago, in the 38th year of Asa, king of Judah, Ahab becomes the king of Israel. King Ahab marries Jezebel, whose very name has come to mean "a lady of questionable virtue." That's because Jezebel had fallen in with false prophets. At Jezebel's urging, Ahab also forsakes the Lord God, builds temples to the Phoenician god Baal, and begins murdering Israeli prophets. This is more offensive to God than anything ever done by previous kings. So God commissions Elijah to challenge Baal's false prophets. With God's help and a series of miraculous signs, Elisha overcomes the prophets. His victory convinces the people to return to the one true God. However, that's not the end of the story! Elijah has Baal's prophets seized, and they are executed by having their throats cut. And that's where we find Elijah in today's lesson. After the slaughter, Elijah flees the scene, rightly fearing reprisals from Ahab and Jezebel. There are a twists and turns in the story. But it's enough to say that both King Ahab and Queen Jezebel come to a bad end. And it's really bad. Ahab is killed and dogs lick the dead kings. Worse, it so prophesied that born into Ahab's line will be devoured by dogs! And that's exactly what happens to Jezebel. So we are left with this disturbing image of devouring dogs. And it's not comforting. Nor is it an image that we commonly associate with prophets, let alone a merciful God. But its' in the midst of this chaos, that the angel of the Lord comes to Elijah - not once but twice - urging him to eat. Eat the angel says or the journey will be too much for him. Elijah eats and drinks, and nourished by the food of the angel, is able to walk 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

That brings us to the gospel. As it opens, we see scandalized people murmuring about the strange, sacrilegious things Jesus is saying about himself. Jesus claims to be the bread of life. Jesus claims that He, and only He can lead them to the Father. And it's not at all well received! The general attitude is – Who does this man think he is. In a very real way, these claims turn the chief priests, Pharisees, and even the people against Jesus. So much so, that they begin actively looking for way to arrest and kill him. They've pretty much forgotten about the healing miracles. They've pretty much forgotten about how he fed the 5,000 with almost nothing. And the tables are turning. In the Book of Kings, the false prophets of Baal, King Ahab, and Queen Jezebel turn away from God and are literally devoured by dogs. In John's gospel, the chief priests and Pharisees turn away from Jesus, but this time it's Jesus, the Bread of Life, who will be tested, and in a figurative sense will also to be devoured by dogs.

There's nothing at all comforting about an image of a devouring dog. Indeed, it's an image that gets us squirming in our seats. We might brush off devouring dogs as some Old Testament, eye-for-an-eye thing? But consider this! A desperate Elijah cries out -- *Enough O LORD! Take my life!* And Elijah is given food for the journey, not once, but twice. Because without it, the journey is just too long! In John's Gospel, a desperate Jesus hanging on a cross is offered sour wine on a sponge. Immediately after taking it, Jesus cries out "it is finished" then dies. If you think about that for a moment, isn't it odd that a desperate prophet begging for death is given nourishment and strength. By contrast, a desperate Jesus receives sour wine and death. It just seems odd! Unless of course, you remember that Jesus didn't come to be fed. Rather, Jesus came to feed us. And we desperately need the Bread of Life that Jesus offers. Not once, or twice, but time and time, and time again! We need the Bread of Life because sooner or later, the devouring dogs come looking for us. They want us to embrace: bitterness; fury; anger; shouting; reviling; and all malice. The very things that Jesus asks us to renounce. It's when the devouring dogs strike that we most need of the Bread of Life. We need that Bread to tame the devouring dogs. We need that Bread to imitate Jesus. We need that Bread to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving of one another. The Bread of Life has come down from heaven, to give us what we need. *So get up and eat! Or the Journey will be too long for you!*