

August 8, 2021
1 Kings 19:4-8; John 6:35, 41-51

Pentecost 11
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“Bread for the Journey”

“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

“This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.”

“Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

I loved hearing those words when I turned on the television after school, announcing that another episode of *The Adventures of Superman* was about to begin. Superman was a hero for many of us in my neighbourhood, a superhero from another planet who always triumphed over evil, who overcame obstacles that no mortal could thwart, and who made the city of Metropolis a safer place to live. After we watched that day’s installment of Superman’s adventures, we would often grab towels from our parents’ linen closets and fashion them into capes, running around the streets pretending that we could also fight a never-ending battle for truth and justice.

There’s something very appealing about Superman and other superheroes, figures who have powers to overcome the evils and difficulties that challenge us in our daily lives. Many of the highest-earning films in the past decade have been superhero sagas featuring such figures as Spiderman, the Black Panther, Aquaman, Black Widow, and many other superheroes who exploits attract viewers from around the world. In a time when we feel helpless and unable to solve many of the challenges that confront us, the appeal of a larger-than-life figure who can overcome all obstacles on our behalf is very enticing. But superheroes are fictional characters; there is no one who can fly like Superman, or spin a web like Spiderman, or run at supersonic speeds like the Flash. But sometimes we transfer our desire for superheroes onto real-life persons, endowing them with powers and abilities that no person possesses. We turn important persons into legendary figures, believing that they are somehow above the difficulties that ordinary people face, that they can solve all our problems in a flash. Sadly, we are often disappointed when we discover that persons who we have elevated to legendary status are mere mortals, no more powerful or above life’s challenges than anyone else. We are often disappointed when we discover that superheroes only exist in the movies and in comic books; as Bruce

Springsteen sang, we should not “*waste your summer waiting in vain for a saviour to rise from these streets.*”

It would be easy to look at the people we meet in the Bible as superheroes, as legendary figures who are superior in power and faith to us mere mortals. One person that would especially fit into this category is Elijah, the great prophet whose exploits at times appear to be beyond the scope of mortals. He appears at a time when the faith of Israel was being challenged by those who worshiped the Canaanite god Baal, worship that found its way into the court of the Judean king Ahab. Elijah exhibits powers that distinguish him from other Old Testament prophets; this includes his visit to the widow at Zarephath, when he promises that “*the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth*” (1 Kings 17:14). This is followed by Elijah’s epic confrontation with the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel, where Elijah challenges them to build an altar and call upon their god to bring fire upon it. When their efforts fail, Elijah orders that the wood on his altar be doused with water three times; he then calls upon the Lord to “*answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back*” (1 Kings 18:37). Sure enough, the Lord sends fire upon Elijah’s altar, so that even the water that was in the trench was licked up. When the people witnessed this display of the power of the true God, “*they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.’*” (18:39). Elijah emerges from this story triumphant and seemingly untouchable. But the story takes a sudden and dramatic turn as we encounter Elijah in today’s First Lesson:

- “Previous to this episode, Elijah is portrayed as larger than life – faithful, confident, and authoritative. He is able to bring about miracles through prayer, even raising the dead and calling fire down from heaven. He is able to confront a powerful king and accuse him of sin, and dares to challenge a large crowd of Baalists. He is able to outrun Ahab’s chariot in a seventeen-mile race. So we certainly would not expect to find an easily intimidated, suicidal, self-doubting yet self-righteous Elijah in chapter 19.” – Choon-Leong Seow.

But this is exactly the Elijah we encounter in the next chapter of 1 Kings. Following the defeat of the priests of Baal, “*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.*” (19:1). Jezebel, a princess from Sidon and fanatical devotee of Baal, immediately reacts by sending a message to Elijah, vowing to kill him: “*So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.*” (19:2). Elijah is forced to flee

into the wilderness, where he takes shelter under a solitary broom tree. It is here that the prophet shows that he is no superhero but a very mortal human being, not a legendary hero but a person who believes he has reached the end of the road: *“He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’”* (19:4). Elijah echoes the words of Moses, another person who is often placed on a pedestal, when the great Liberator despairs over his powerlessness in addressing the needs of the people in the wilderness:

- “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my misery.” – Numbers 11:14-15.

Elijah believes that he has reached the end of the road, that he has “run out of gas,” that he has no more strength to go on; *“Elijah, in other words, is in no better situation than were his forebears inasmuch as he, like them, is left with too much to bear on his own.”* (Seow). Elijah lays down under the broom tree and falls asleep, hoping that he will never wake up.

Elijah believes that his work as a prophet is finished; but the Lord does not see the work of Elijah as having reached its end, not is God willing to take the life of the prophet. Elijah is roused from his sleep by an angel, who commands that the prophet *“get up and eat”* (19:5). When he opens his eyes, Elijah discovers *“there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water.”* (19:6). The Hebrew word for “hot stones” (*resapim*) is found elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Isaiah 6:6, referring to the hot coal with which the seraph touches the lips of Isaiah (*“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is departed and your sin is blotted out.’”*). “Jar” (*sappahat*) is also uncommon; it was used previously in 1 Kings to refer to refer to the Lord’s provision for Elijah’s needs through the widow of Zarephath: *“The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.”* (17:16). Elijah eats and drinks the food that has been provided, and after eating he lies down again. But the angel awakens him again and commands him to *“get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you”* (19:7). Elijah must accept the nourishment that the Lord provides in the wilderness because his work is not finished. Strengthened by this meal, Elijah gets up and journeys *“forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God”* (19:8), an alternate name for Mount Sinai. Elijah is not a superhero; he is an ordinary human being who

is able to accomplish extraordinary things through the empowerment of the Lord. When his own resources are exhausted and he cannot see any way to go forward, God provides him with the nourishment he needs to resume his journey and his work as a prophet of the Lord who continues to feed and empower God's people to fulfill their purpose of being the covenant people through whom "*all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3).

- "Elijah is touched by a divine intermediary and, when he fails to get the point, the Lord speaks to him a third time. Elijah's perspective is strongly challenged, and a lesson is offered to him; but he is never rebuked for showing weakness. Rather, Elijah is accepted as he is and is merely called back to his ministry: 'God, return to your way!' God does not let him go simply because he is burned out and depressed." – Seow.

The need for empowerment nourishment that allows God's people to continue to continue the work into which God has called them when their own resources of strength are depleted is at the heart of Jesus' message to his followers that "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" (John 6:35). But unlike Elijah, those who hear Jesus' words are not as ready to partake of this bread and trust in the words of our Lord. John reports that the crowd's response to Jesus' words is one of unbelief: they "*began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread of life.'*" (6:41). The verb "complain" (*gongyzo*) is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, to describe the Israelites' grumbling and complaining in the wilderness ("The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness." – Exodus 16:2). The crowd "*demonstrates the same recalcitrance as their forebears*" (Gail O'Day); they echo the response of the people in Jesus' hometown synagogue who ask "*'is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?'* And they took offense at him." (Mark 6:3). As Jesus' family connections became a barrier for his fellow Nazarenes to accept him, here Jesus' humanity becomes the obstacle that prevents this crowd from believing his declaration that "*I have come down from heaven*" (6:42).

Jesus responds by restating the central theological themes of God's initiative in drawing people to Jesus and the promise of resurrection on the last day: "*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day*" (6:44). The verse that Jesus quotes appears to be a paraphrase of the teachings of both Isaiah and Jeremiah:

- “All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.” – Isaiah 54:13.
- “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” – Jeremiah 31:33.

The citation underscores God’s initiative in making faith possible and the universality of God’s actions (“*they shall **all** be taught*”). “*Because Jesus’ claims are grounded in God’s work and identity, they cannot simply be dismissed as personal idiosyncrasy*” (C.H. Dodd).

Jesus uses “hearing” and “learning” as metaphors for human receptivity to what God offers when he states that “*everyone who has heard and learned from the Father come to me*” (6:45). The reason for the crowd’s grumbling lies in their perception, not in Jesus’ claims. God has taught them, but they do not hear and learn; those who hear God’s Word need to heed the words of the angels to the churches in Revelation that “*anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches*” (Revelation 2:7).

Using the phrase common in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus proclaims that “*very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life*” (6:47), a teaching that Martin Luther reinforces in his discussion on who is worthy to receive the gift of Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ: “*Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin,’ is really worthy and well prepared.*” The one who believes that the gift of the bread of life is “for you” receives eternal life from the one who proclaims again that “*I am the bread of life.*” (6:48). The manna eaten by the ancestors in the wilderness met the Israelite’s immediate needs for sustenance but did not satisfy ultimate human needs: “*Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died*” (6:49). The bread from heaven of which Jesus speaks, however, does satisfy ultimate human need; it is the bread that gives us strength to continue our work as God’s holy people even as it gives us a foretaste of the feast to come when God gathers all of God’s people, when “*the LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken*” (Isaiah 25:8). Those who partake of the true bread from heaven receive the gift of eternal life that is ours through our Lord’s giving of his own flesh as an expression of the same love manifest when “*the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*” (1:14), whose death of

the Cross is an expression of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ: *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (15:13).

- "I am saved by grace alone. It is grace that opens my eyes to see my sin and my need of the living God who is made known to the world in Jesus the Christ, the bread of life, the one who, when I come to him, will never leave me hungry again. When – invited – I turn to him, I have my thirst quenched from a living stream." – O. Benjamin Sparks.

Superman does not exist; superheroes have no basis in reality. Our desire for larger-than-life, legendary figures, for *"a saviour to rise from these streets,"* inevitably leads to disappointment. Those we put on a pedestal soon prove to be flawed human beings, no different than any other ordinary person. But this common humanity need not be a cause for despair, for in this world filled with mere flesh-and-blood mortals there is the one who dwells among us as the fulfillment of God's promise of *Emmanuel*, God who is with us. Our faith is rooted in our Lord Jesus Christ, born of a human mother but also the very presence of the holy God among us, the one who proclaims God's Word and accomplishes God's Will through his death and resurrection, the one who proclaims that those who are born anew through our baptism into his death and resurrection are now *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,"* those who have been empowered by God's Holy Spirit *"to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Peter 2:9). As God called ordinary, flawed human beings like Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, and Paul and empowered them to accomplish extraordinary things in the name of the Lord, God continues to call each of us *"just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt"* to be the people who, called by Christ and strengthened by the bread of life that he offers, can get up and follow in the footsteps of Elijah in continuing the work that God has set before us, strengthened by *"him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20-21).

There is no Superman, but called by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit we can accomplish superhuman task because of our faith that through Christ the Bread of Life *"I can accomplish all things through [Christ] who strengthens me."* (Philippians 4:13).

Amen.