

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.(1 Kings 19:3-8)

God Gives Us Strength

"I'm just so tired of this!" Have you ever felt that way? Maybe it was a problem at work. Maybe you were dealing with a relative. Maybe your car kept breaking down, and you were just sick of it. You might even have said, "I can't take it anymore!" Of course, when we say things like that, we realize that's not completely true. We may very well have to take it some more. But we don't want to. Well, that's life in a sinful world. We all get exhausted, sometimes. We grow so weary that it would be tempting to just get in the car and drive away. God knows how hard life is. He knows that there are problems we just can't solve by ourselves. In our Old Testament lesson for today, he did a miracle for Elijah to show us this truth: **God gives us strength.**

I.

Through Elijah, we see first of all that **God gives us strength to face real life.** Elijah lived at a time when Israel was unfaithful. The king, Ahab, and his wife Jezebel, worshipped idols and persecuted believers. God sent Elijah to confront the king and the queen at a huge assembly. The king and queen brought 850 false prophets while Elijah stood alone. Elijah challenged those 850 false prophets: each side would prepare a sacrifice. They would pray that their God would send fire from heaven to consume it. Of course, the idols did nothing. But when Elijah prayed, God sent fire from heaven that burned up a bull and the altar that Elijah had laid it out on. The people chanted, "The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!" and at Elijah's command, they slaughtered the false prophets. Then, Elijah in the power of the Holy Spirit, ran ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way back to his palace.

It was a good day. But after that great triumph came a let down. The queen swore that she would kill Elijah that very day. As soon as word reached him, Elijah ran away. He went out into the desert alone and laid down under a broom tree and prayed to die. He said, "**I have had enough, LORD. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.**"

What was going on with Elijah? He was exhausted. He probably thought that once he showed the people who the true God was, they would follow the LORD and even the king and queen would have to admit that there is only one true God. But unbelievers don't do that. As Jesus said in our gospel reading, no one comes to Jesus, no one believes in the one true God, unless the Father draws him. God alone gives faith. The sin we were born with twists away from the true God and clings to any other god except him. At the pinnacle of his career, Elijah had to face the hardness of the human heart. Some people think that he became clinically depressed. Maybe that's true. He certainly had all the symptoms: he withdrew into himself, he didn't want to do anything but sleep, and all he could do was rerun in his head over and over again how hopeless it all was.

Do you ever feel the way Elijah did? Maybe you get tired of all the antichristian stuff in the news and in our country. The Supreme Court has now ruled that a Christian who owns a bakery can't refuse to make a cake for a gay wedding, even if there are a hundred other bakeries in the same town willing to do it. You have to take part in celebrating that sin. The world pushes God away. And we get tired of standing up for the truth when no ones to hear it. We get tired of sending our kids to universities where holding to their faith is going to be equated with hate speech.

But those attacks on our faith aren't the only things that wear us down. Life in a sinful world wears us down. Just to give one example, we have members in our congregation who have struggled with painful, debilitating diseases literally for years. You don't realize how big a deal it is to walk without pain until you

have arthritis or your knees or hip wears out. Thankfully, we have surgery and medical treatment and it does a lot. But I still regularly minister to people who have hurt and dealt with side effects from drugs for years.

But it isn't just terrible things like that. There are lots of everyday things that exhaust us. I read this week about a study done in Germany about having children. They discovered that having small children is hard. Who would've thought it? In all seriousness, they learned that most German couples have fewer children than they planned because of how much work it is to pay attention to them all day, and how unpleasant it is to change their diapers and have your sleep schedule interrupted over and over again. Children are a blessing from God. I firmly believe that. But in a sinful world, raising them can be exhausting. And so can going to work and driving in big city traffic and paying bills and on and on. I think we all can imagine curling up under a broom tree and giving up. I bet we all have moments when we wish we were already in heaven.

So how did God deal with Elijah when he felt that way? Well, God didn't say, "It's too bad, Elijah, but this sinful world stinks. You better buck up and deal with it." Instead, God did a miracle. He sent an angel to wake him up and feed him. Twice Elijah woke up and ate the bread and drank the water the angel provided. Then did you see what happened? Elijah got up, "**strengthened by that food**" the Bible says, and he traveled forty days and forty nights – non-stop, on foot – to Horeb. Horeb is Mt. Sinai. It's way out in the Sinai desert. It took more than a month for him to get there on foot, but he apparently didn't need another bite of food or drink of water to get there. Now, God wasn't done addressing Elijah's needs yet. There at Horeb, God came to him made great promises to him. Then he sent him back to finish his work. But God paid attention to where he was and what he needed. Every stop of the way, God strengthened Elijah, until he was refreshed and reinvigorated and he returned to testify to the Lord until God took him to heaven.

Do I really need to say it? God does the same for us. Now, it's not very likely that we're going to have an angel appear to us and give us bread and water that will keep us going for forty days and forty nights. Just because God did a miracle in the Bible does not mean he's promising us the same kind of miracle. But when he does a miracle in the Bible he's telling us that he will use his wisdom and his power and his love to take care of our needs. That doesn't mean that our problems will go away. Elijah had to travel for more than a month before God gave him his final answer, and when he did, God didn't say that Ahab and Jezebel would just disappear. It would take time for that to happen. But God was on the job. And until God's purposes were fulfilled, what God did do was strengthen Elijah. What God did do was minister to him in the emotional state he was in.

God does the same thing for us and it is truly a miracle, even though it happens in such a common way that it's hard for us to see it. God ministers to us when he declares his love and his forgiveness and his plans for us. Jesus was the only perfect human being who ever lived. He was the only one who didn't get down or feel defeated or become exhausted by life here. He was perfect for us. He died and he paid for all the times we want to give up and just die. He died and paid for all the weakness that keep our faith from trusting what God is doing. He rose and God has forgiven us and he sees Jesus in all that we do. And every time God tells us that, he works in our hearts and builds us up.

But because we human beings have an amazing ability to make the best news ever routine, God varies his approach. But he declares that gospel to us. He does it in sermons. He does it through the word that you read at home alone and with your family. He does it when you confess your sins and hear that you are forgiven. He does it through the promise he gave you in your baptism. He does it through Holy Communion which we will celebrate in just a few minutes. It's probably too much to say that the bread Elijah ate was a prophecy of communion. But we who have and treasure communion can't help but think about it when God uses bread to do something like this. Through the means of grace, the gospel, he renews your hopes and lifts up your heart and gives you the strength you need to face another day today.

He does more. He gives us a congregation full of believers who encourage us and build us up. We aren't like Elijah who had to stand alone against those 850 prophets. We have each other. God calls us to encourage one another, all the more as we see Judgment Day approaching in all those godless things that are going on around us and it wears us all down. God sends pastors and teachers to minister to the struggles you personally face. We can't do a miracle and cure your hurts. But we can listen. We can love. We can remind you of Jesus' love and forgiveness and his promise to be with you to the very end of the age. And God gives us prayer which he always hears and answers. All that is yours. Through it all, God gives you strength to face life in this sinful world.

II.

But, of course, that's not the end of the story. If God only carried us through the hardships of this life, our faith would be a cheat and fraud, like all other religions are. The most that Islam or Hinduism or Mormonism or humanism can give you is some tools and some sense of peace for this life. God does more. He does give us strength and even blessing here. But ultimately, everything he does here is designed to get us to heaven. **God gives us strength to finish our journey.**

That really is what he did for Elijah. The angel said that the trip was too much for him. He may have been thinking of the long trip out to Mt. Sinai, if that's where Elijah was already going. The Bible doesn't tell us where he was heading when he walked out into the desert, although he was clearly moving in that direction. But I don't think we want to forget the truth reality that all our lives here are really a trip, a journey to heaven. None of us would get there without the power of God. None of us would be able to overcome the challenges that we face here without his grace. So he gives us that grace every day. Without the gift of prayer, who knows how many obstacles would already have defeated us? But God heard and he answered. Without the power of God, none of us could remain in the faith until we reach eternal life.

So God ministers to us. Not just once. Like he did with Elijah, he deals with us every day. He knows what we need when. He knew when to give Elijah the strength to make the journey out to Horeb and he knew when to confront him and give him the promises he needed to hear. God knows what we need, too. He knows how close each of us is to the end of our journey. He knows what challenges our faith still has to face. He prepares us for those things because he's preparing us to go home to heaven. Above all, he works day in and day out to renew our faith, to enable us to trust him even when the whole world stands against us, because that faith brings us home.

How does he do that? By telling us again and again about Jesus. He died. He rose. He ascended into heaven to run this world for our good. He hears our prayers. He decides what blessings and what challenges we face. He is the perfect person to do that because he lived our lives. He knows what it's like. And he is the perfect person to do that because he died for us. After suffering hell itself on the cross for us, he's not going to give up on us. And he rose for us. He has all power over life and death. We need fear no evil.

God will give us strength. The funny thing about it is that we don't always realize how strong he has made us because having strength does not mean that we stop hurting. We will bear the cross for as long as this life lasts. But no matter how weak we feel, no matter how many times we say, "I just can't do it anymore!" tomorrow, God will give us strength again. He will bring us through this life. And he will bring us home to heaven. Amen.