

August 12, 2018

Deacon Erin Swenson-Reinhold

1 Kings 19:4-8 and John 6:35, 41-51

Rest for the Journey

Good morning. Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You, O Lord. Amen.

Growing up, a dog was always part of our family. I enjoyed the unconditional love and companionship a dog provided, and I was determined to bring this into my adult life. After graduating, I moved to the central valley of California and quickly adopted Scooby. He was great! He was a black and brown dachshund that just wanted to be loved. He quickly learned who was in charge and made certain to remind me of that simple fact every chance he got.

As a member of my family, Scooby went everywhere with me. We took car rides, attempted plane trips, and took lots of walks around our house. For those of you who have never been to the Central Valley, it's a hot and dusty landscape. For a small dog with short legs, it was not the most pleasant place to walk, but I was determined that Scooby and I would persevere.

One day as we were walking through the orchard all of a sudden Scooby stopped and lay down. With all my might, I could not get him to move. He was done. He was hot. He was tired, and he was expressing his frustration with me and my desire to go on these dreadful walks. I tried cajoling him; I tried forcing him; I even tried bribing him to get up and walk, but he refused. He remained on the ground and told me he was not going to take another step...so I stopped. I waited, and I remained with him trusting he would move when he was ready.

After a few minutes, I gently bent down and rubbed his ears. He glanced my way and quickly put his head back on the ground. I tried again and reminded him of the comfortable bed waiting for him at home, but he refused to move. I waited some more, and then I told him about his dinner and the fresh water that was waiting for him at home.

With that, Scooby stood up and began to walk. He was ready. All he needed was a few minutes to rest his weary body...to prepare for the remainder of the trip...to be fed and nourished for the journey ahead.

Our stories over the last few weeks have focused on how God feeds and nourishes us. We have slowly been making our way through the Gospel of John, and we've heard miraculous stories about how fed the 5000, walked on water, and performed assorted miracles – all tangible signs of how God shows up and transforms lives. Our Old Testament readings have echoed a similar sentiment - that God provides, often in mysterious ways, and we are called to follow and believe.

Today is no different. In our Old Testament reading, we hear a story about the prophet Elijah. This is not a great moment for Elijah. Elijah's a powerful prophet – you don't mess with him – but something is different about Elijah in this story. Earlier in 1 Kings, we heard how Elijah fought Jezebel and King Ahab, and it was quite a fight with fire raining down from heaven. We pick up the story, and Elijah is exhausted after this fight and his efforts trying to convince the Israelites of their broken ways. He's given it his all, and he's worn out – emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

We see him running into the wilderness at the end of his tether pleading with God. He was done just like my dog, Scooby, he couldn't go any further. He found a tree, sat down, and asked God to let him die. This response seems out of character for Elijah because he was known for his strength. What was going on with him?

Whenever we fight and struggle, it wears on us – emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I wonder if Elijah simply was tired of fighting? I wonder if Jezebel's rage pushed him to his breaking point, and he couldn't see God in the midst of this final challenge. I wonder if he struggled to feel God's presence in the midst of his despair, so he did the only thing he knew to do...he ran. He ran into the wilderness with the hope of finding God, but the wilderness only highlighted his desolation and despair, and all he felt was more alone.

Yet, despite himself, in this hot, dark wilderness, at his most broken state, God met Elijah. God saw his hopelessness, and God heard his despair. God sent an angel who gently approached Elijah, touched his arm, and offered him something to drink. After drinking, Elijah received the healing rest that he desperately needed. After a while, the angel returned, gently touched Elijah again, and said, 'Get up – eat! It's time to go.' So, Elijah got up. He ate and drank the meal God provided, and he left nourished for his 40-day journey. (1 Kings 19:7-8)

Elijah ran into the wilderness hoping to find the presence, provision, and voice of God.¹ He ran from his home out of fear and desperation not knowing where to find God but somehow trusting that God would be present despite his fear and doubt. We live in a world that is often filled with desperation, and it is natural to wonder where God is in the midst of this darkness. Yet the stories of our ancestors offer us comfort that God hears us, feeds us, and provides a comforting hand to get us through our pain and despair.

I recently heard a story about a woman who experienced an accident so severe that she was unable to move. One evening, in the still of the night when the quiet was so loud and her despair was so great, a nurse came into her room and simply touched her arm. No vitals were taken. No machines were checked. Just a warm hand on her arm – an acknowledgement that she wasn't alone. The gift of presence was offered and received – and, in response, this woman was nourished and offered rest for her journey.

The reality is that sometimes it is hard to trust that God will provide – particularly when we are so very tired. Sometimes, it is hard to see how God will ever show up in the mess of our lives.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective, Thomas Steagald, p. 316, year B, Volume 3.

Sometimes, it is difficult to trust God's word and obey God's will, so like Elijah and the crowd following Jesus, we complain and become disheartened. We lie down and simply want to give up. We cry out to God – 'I'm done. No more. I'm not taking another step.' Yet God does something miraculous. God meets us in our exhaustion. God meets us in our despair. God hears us...feeds us...offers us care and compassion...and invites us to rest for the journey ahead.

Throughout Scripture we hear stories of God providing for the people - the Israelites received manna and quail as they traveled in the wilderness for 40 years, and Elijah was fed and nourished for his 40-day journey to Mt. Horeb. Today's Old Testament reading reminds us how God provided for Elijah despite his doubt and despair. Similarly, in the Gospel reading, John reminds us that Jesus provides for us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Jesus is the Bread of Life, and we find nourishment through our faith in Him manifest in the meal we share at the communion table each week. As we receive Jesus' body and blood, we are promised everlasting life and hope. We are given hope that fear and fatigue, despair and derision will not defeat us. Despite our complaining against God and our lack of trust in His presence, God saves us through the eternal gift of this bread of life.²

On those days when I am tired and exhausted, I remember, Scooby, and how he simply needed some time to rest and all I needed was to stay with him in that moment. On those days when I feel alone and isolated, I remember the woman and how the nurse offered her care and compassion simply by being present with her through the darkest hour of the night. On days when I am full of doubt tempted to complain, I hold firm to the Good News that God hears our exhaustion. God hears our cries. God hears our desire to simply give up, and God does not dismiss, ignore, or minimize these feelings.

With grace, love, and compassion, God comes to us, gently touches our arm, and reminds us to eat and drink so we can be fed and nourished. God gives us the gift of time and space to rest and be nourished before embarking on the next stage of our journey. Like all the stories we heard today, God meets us and walks with us. God reminds us that we are never alone and there is rest for the journey. Thanks be to God! Amen!

² Sunday and Seasons, Preaching, p. 221. Craig Alan Satterlee. 'From a Scholar'.