



The Bread of Transformation

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

August 12, 2018; I Kings 19:1-8

Have you ever been really frustrated that someone interpreted something you did or said in a way that was not at all what you intended? Have you ever thought someone thought about you in a certain way, maybe even didn't like you, only to discover later that you were completely off? Obviously the answer to both of these questions, for most of us, is yes. We routinely tell ourselves stories about what we experience, and the stories we tell matter very much. How we interpret a situation makes all the difference in how we choose to respond or not respond. And that's true in the significant moments of our lives, but also in everyday situations. When my cousin rearranges the dishes in the dishwasher after I put them in there, what story do I tell myself about why she did that? Maybe she thinks I'm a slob; maybe she has a ferocious commitment to not wasting energy; maybe it just soothes her anxiety to organize things. What story does an alcoholic tell himself about his drinking? That he can stop anytime he wants? That he knows he can't stop so it's reasonable to despair? That there is grace and mercy to be found in admitting powerlessness and turning one's life to the care of God as he understands God? Regardless of your political opinions, how do you interpret why your neighbor voted for Donald Trump? Maybe she thought a businessman ought to run the country. Maybe she honestly believed abortion was one of the most violent things happening in our country and she was willing to put up with Trump to overturn Roe v.

Wade. Maybe she just liked a politician who didn't talk like a politician. Maybe she was a white supremacist. Does the answer to these questions change the way you relate to this person?

What story are we in?

The prophet Elijah in today's lectionary readings has come to the end of his rope. He is a prophet who has been standing alone for years, trying to bring his people back to God. Their kings have been increasingly evil. He's shown the country their violence; he's shown them the imperial gods they served have no power for life or generativity or justice. And now the queen Jezebel has threatened his life. So he flees the country and goes south. He leaves his servant behind and heads just one day into the desert wilderness. One day's journey is all he's got left in him. The story he's been living in, the one where God has appointed him as a prophet to call the people and the leadership of Israel to repentance, has failed, as far as he can see. Jezebel has threatened his life, but actually, he's come to the point where he wants to die as well.

So Elijah is in the desert of Beersheba in the vast heat of the Negev, sitting in the only shade there is, under a tree, praying for God to take his life. And he goes to sleep. And someone wakes him by touching him. Our translation calls him an angel. The angel tells Elijah to eat and drink and then go back to sleep. And a second time, this compassionate messenger from God meets Elijah where he is, without judgment, and wakes him up, and tells him to eat and drink – and then he mentions a journey. And something about this encounter changes

Elijah. Elijah's despair shifts, and he becomes willing to make a journey of forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Because you see, Elijah is finding out, little by little, what story he's actually in. He thought he was in the wilderness to die, but the wilderness of Beersheba is the same one that Abraham's slave girl and concubine Hagar went when she was banished by Abraham, taking her son Ishmael with her, and where just like Elijah they sat down under a tree to die of thirst in the heat of the desert. But God met Hagar and Ishmael and gave them water and hope and a future, and God sent the angel to do the same thing for Elijah. Elijah was then sent on a journey to Horeb which took forty days and forty nights. He may or may not have known what a journey of forty days was all about, but the number forty is all over scripture, do you remember? Noah and his family and the animals rode the flood in safety in the ark for forty days while the world drowned in its violence, and Moses went up the mountain to encounter God for forty days so God could give the people the Torah, God's guidance for how they could live, not as slaves but as free people with dignity. The liberated Israelites wandered the wilderness for forty years before they finally came to a place they could call home. The number forty is just code for transformation in our scriptures. So whether Elijah knows it or not his journey of forty days to Horeb is a journey of transformation, it's a journey where the despair in him needs to die and a new encounter with God needs to happen. He's going to Horeb, the mountain of God, which is also called Sinai, the place where God met Moses in the burning bush and the place where God gave the people the law. It's the birthplace of God liberating the people from slavery.

So what helped Elijah move from despair to being willing to make the journey of transformation?

What changed him was being compassionately met in his despair, and touched and fed, by the angel, the messenger of God. That bread was not just for survival. It was for transformation. The bread of transformation is discovering ourselves in a bigger story than one we've imagined. The bread of transformation is discovering that we are not alone, but we are a people being called by God to a particular way of life and to the worship of one God, not the gods of the empire. The bread of transformation is learning what story we're in, and discovering that the main character in the story is not Jezebel or Ahab or any power figure or even prophet, but the living God. Despair comes when we think everything depends on us, and we've spent everything we are and have without results. Transformation comes when God encounters us in our despair and feeds us with a liberation and life and hope that are beyond our capacity to imagine or enact.

Today is the one year anniversary of the protests in Charlottesville, Virginia last year, when white nationalists faced off against antiracism and antifacism groups, and when a white nationalist drove his car into a crowd of people, killing a young woman, Heather Heyer. Today a "Unite the Right" rally for white nationalists is being held in Lafayette Park, right in front of the White House, and a block away nearly forty different antiracism groups are gathering to protest the policies of white nationalism and white supremacy. These are not contemporary issues only. The debate about who is worthy, who is safe, who is welcome and for what, and what we truly mean when we say that "all men are created equal," continues to play out on our national stage

and in our homes and neighborhoods. How will we tell the story of our country? How does this story affect each one of us personally? How will we choose to engage or not engage? And what does any of it have to do with the God that we love, the God we worship?

What I know is this. We are not called to individual survival only. We live, not by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We are called not to a journey of despair but a journey of transformation. There are times when we like Elijah are called to return to the mountain of God, to encounter God anew, so that we will have the moral courage to stand for what is right even if it feels like we are alone in our courage. Our scriptures describe a God who loves the orphan and the widow and the stranger and the younger brother and the poor and the one without power. Our God is a God who liberates the slaves. Our God is a God who calls us to love the Lord your God with all your heart your soul your mind and your strength and to love your neighbor as yourselves, and Jesus tells us our neighbor includes Samaritans and tax collectors and hookers and lepers and everyone society deems unacceptable or disgusting or unworthy. Should we despair about what is happening in the story of our country? Should we shut it out because it doesn't seem to impact all of us personally and we are sick of hearing about it?

I don't know where you're at with all this, but I do know this. God didn't send the angel of God to berate Elijah for not doing enough. God sent the angel to touch him, feed him, and encourage him to get up and make the journey. Let's be angels of God for each other. Let's have the humility to suspend whatever story we're telling about each other, and meet each other with compassion and the willingness to listen to

each other. Let's feed each other with encouragement that whatever story is playing on the national stage, we're part of a deeper, richer, wilder story whose central character is not any politician or power figure or prophet but the living God. The central character of our story is the God who calls us, never to despair, but to a journey of transformation for the sake of the world God so loves.