

## **Bread for the Journey**

**1 Kings 19:1-8**

**March 19 2017**

Growing up just twenty minutes from the Blue Ridge Mountains, as I did, **and** growing up with parents who loved to hike, weekends in my childhood were frequently spent in those mountains. Saturday morning we'd pile into our blue Ford Escort station wagon, and drive on up to the Blue Ridge parkway.

The Appalachian trail criss-crosses the parkway, so there are a number of places where you can park the car, pick up the trail, and hike into the woods as far as you want to go. Or, rather, as far as your parents want to go, which was almost always farther than we kids wanted to go.

"How far are we going today, Mom?"

"It's just an eight mile loop."

We kids didn't think "just" and "eight mile" belonged in the same sentence. But there were some things that would always make the hike better, and keep you moving forward.

If there was the promise of a waterfall along the way, that was always good incentive --

on a hot day you could wade in and stand under the rushing stream.

And if the path was going to lead up to a mountain peak, that would also give you a little extra boost,

because it really was pretty awesome to stand on a rock on the top of a peak surveying the mountains around you and being the king of the world.

But what really made the hike good, what truly gave you strength for the journey, was if Mom had brought **gorp**.

I don't even know if it's still called gorp; trail mix is what I see it called now, but we knew it as gorp.

And gorp was a delicious mix of nuts and raisins, and best of all, lots of M&M's, all designed to pick you up and give you energy when you had run out of steam.

You have to understand:

we weren't allowed to have candy in my house growing up.

But somehow the M&Ms in gorp were permissible,

so gorp was the only time we got chocolate.

And boy did it taste good.

When you were halfway up a mountain, and the peak seemed to be getting further away instead of closer,

and your feet were aching and your thighs hurt from the upward climb,

my parents would announce a rest break,

and out would come the gorp.

And after fistfulls of chocolate, we'd revive,

strengthened for the journey, ready to march to the top of the Virginian Mount Everest before us.

Manna from heaven, that stuff was.

Bread for the journey.

Bread for the journey.

Our journey, of course, was for fun --

even if we kids wouldn't always have used that word.

At the end of the day we were back in our beds, dreaming of gorp.

But there are a lot of people every day in this world making journeys of a much different nature -- and not at all by choice.

For them, to find sustenance and strength for the journey is a matter of survival.

And there are those whose calling is to give them that strength.

Back in the Fall of 2015, as the refugee crisis in Europe grew,

I read a story about a baker, a 76 year old bakery owner on the island of Kos, in Greece.

He'd grown up a refugee himself, he'd known hunger, true hunger.

And so, as the boats kept arriving on the beaches of his island,

he decided the one thing he could do was offer bread.

Every day he got up early to make an extra 200 pounds of bread,  
every day he loaded it up in the back of his van and drove it to the water's edge.  
And opening up the back door of his van,  
he'd stand there giving it away until it all ran out.  
The reporter who told the story said that the refugees, the children and their  
parents, would stand in line with their hands held out as if awaiting communion --  
and for each of them, Dionysis Arvanitakis would break a long loaf in half,  
and look each person in the eye as he gave it out.  
And the next day he would get up early again,  
bake the bread for the weary travelers again.  
Bread, literally, for the journey.  
Strength for the trail ahead,  
for the climb up the mountain.  
Manna from heaven.

The story that [Henry/ Jack] read to you just now is about bread for the journey.  
About sustenance given at just the right time,  
about food for a weary traveler who had nothing to keep him going.

It's the story of the prophet Elijah, alone in the wilderness.  
Elijah, for whom everything **had** been going right.  
And now wasn't.

Here's the back story:

Elijah was a great and mighty prophet of God,  
renowned, beloved, esteemed.

He was a favorite of the King's, too, who was a faithful follower of God.

He wasn't, however, so much a favorite of the Queen's, a not very nice woman  
named Jezebel.

Jezebel didn't believe in Elijah's God; she worshiped the idols of her hometown.

And so in one of the more dramatic and weird stories of the Bible,

the King and Queen decide to set up a Battle of the priests --

Elijah and the King verse Queen Jezebel and her religion's priests.

Whoever could get their God to start a fire on the altar would win. Well, as it turns out, Elijah and his God get the fire going first, so Elijah is the winning minister -- and it's clear whose God is the real God. I'm telling you, it's kind of a strange story. So anyway, prophet Elijah, after this major victory, **should** be on top of the world. But then everything goes south. 'Cause Queen Jezebel doesn't like losing. And Elijah ends up running for his life from one very angry queen.

And out in the wilderness, running away, he runs out of everything. Food, yes, but also hope. Energy. Interest in life, basically. He'd done everything right, he thought, but now nothing's going right. And he's done. Just -- done. And the story says that he collapses under a broom tree, and he says to God "it's enough." And, exhausted, he falls asleep.

What happens next is what makes this one of the most important stories in the Bible, I think. God brings Elijah bread. Bread for the journey. There's a little tap on Elijah's shoulder, and he opens his eyes and looks, and an angel, it says, an angel says "Get up and eat, Elijah," and there, right beside him, is bread and water. And eats, and he sleeps some more, and it happens again: The touch of an angel, bread for the journey, and God's voice: "Get up and eat, Elijah, or this journey will be too much for you."

When he is at his lowest, when Elijah doesn't want to go on anymore,

when it's all too much --  
that's when God shows up.  
That's when God shows up in the wilderness, in Elijah's wilderness,  
and says: here's bread for the journey.  
Take, and eat.

Here's what God doesn't do.  
God doesn't say "hey, Elijah, it's not that bad, cheer up!"  
God doesn't say, "quit your whining, suck it up, think of everyone who's worse off than you."  
God doesn't do any cheezy pep talks. Or lectures.  
God just says "Here's what you need, son."  
Gorp for the hike, as it were. Bread for the journey.

God comes to Elijah in the worst moment of his life  
and God doesn't try to talk Elijah out of how he feels,  
and God doesn't chastise him for feeling that way.  
God just says "here's what you need to take the next step."

Which is why this story is so important.  
Because everyone at some point finds themselves exhausted in the wilderness.  
Everyone.

A relationship ends;  
a job is lost.  
Grief brings you to your knees.  
What should have been won't be after all.  
There are wildernesses, wildernesses of the spirit.

And into those wildernesses comes a God who says  
"I'm here -- and look, I baked for you!  
Here's bread for the journey.  
I'm going to get you through this.

**We're** going to get through this."

That's who our God is for us.

That's who our God is.

Not a God who tests us,

not a God who lectures or harangues us,

not a God who leaves us to figure it out on our own.

Our God is a God who comes and finds us in our wildernesses,

and brings us bread for the journey.

The God whom we worship grieves with us in our griefs,

and then leads us toward healing.

The God whom we worship shares completely in our disappointments and then

strengthens us with hope.

The God whom we worship mourns with us in our losses,

and then takes us by the hand to guide us toward new joy.

Our God doesn't ever leave us alone in the wilderness to see how we manage on our own --

our God comes to us there, and sits with us and hurts with us --

and then, and then --

God gives us bread for the journey and leads us back out.

This Thursday night at our high school youth group, SPF,

we've got some special guests coming to join us.

There will be thirty men with us (we will definitely need extra pizza)

thirty men from Pivot Ministries in Bridgeport.

They'll be singing gospel songs for us, because that's something they love to do, but they'll also be sharing their stories.

And their stories are about wildernesses.

About the wilderness of addiction,

and about a God who came and found them there, and gave them bread for the journey,

and led them to a place of hope.

We've been blessed to hear some of those stories here in this church before, when the men have joined us here.

One of the most powerful stories we've heard was told to us by a young man who stepped forward from the choir after they'd sung, and said to us,

"you may not recognize me, but I used to come here with my grandfather."

He was right -- we didn't recognize him. But his grandfather had been a deacon of this church,

and young Chris couldn't come to his funeral because he'd been in jail.

That was my lowest point, he told us -- that was his wilderness.

And then he'd found strength for the journey;

bread in the wilderness --

and had been led out by God in the shape of brothers who cared for him.

As one of the other men said:

"God gave me a new life, the life he'd wanted me to have all along."

Bread for the journey;

a way out of the wilderness.

That's how Elijah's story ends, too.

The end of the story that [Henry/Jack] read to you is that Elijah gets up from his meal of God-baked bread,

and moves on --

in the strength of that food, the story says, he journeys on out of the wilderness and up to the mountaintop,

where, in an encounter with the living God,

Elijah remembers who he's called to be, and the life he's called to live.

And he goes and begins to live it again.

So it can be for us, for any of us.

Whatever hard place we find ourselves in, whenever that may come, we are not left there alone, and we are not left there for long.

There is the touch of an angel on our shoulder,  
and a voice that whispers "get up and eat";  
there is bread for the journey  
and One who shows you the way.

We are never left hungry.  
And we are never alone.  
Because we are *way* too loved for that.

Amen.