

Food for the Journey: Eucharist, Love, Jesus

We continue our five week meditation on the sixth chapter of the *Gospel of John* this week with a meditation on the food we need for the journey of life.

The readings begin with an account of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had just defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. You remember, Elijah was the only prophet of Yahweh left after the wicked Queen Jezebel, a pagan, tried to replace the worship of Yahweh with pagan practices. To prove the power of Yahweh and the fact that the pagan God Baal did not exist, Elijah challenged the pagan prophets on Mt. Carmel. He and they prepared a sacrifice and then called on their God to start the sacrificial fire. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal when nothing happened. They danced and screamed and Elijah said, "Shout louder, maybe he's taking a nap or out to lunch." When it was Elijah's turn he called on Yahweh, and a lightning bolt consumed the sacrifice. Then the people attacked the prophets of Baal. Elijah killed them all.

Queen Jezebel was furious. She sent the army to kill Elijah. That's where today's first reading begins. God directs the fleeing Elijah to journey to Mt. Horeb, or as we usually call it Mt. Sinai. That was across the desert. No one could survive that trip alone and by foot as Elijah was. He would have needed a donkey full of water and food. He was finished after a day. "It's over, take me, Lord," he prayed. But God had much more in store for Elijah. So he gave him food for his journey. An angel woke him twice as he slept under a broom tree and gave him food and drink. Strengthened by this, Elijah walked the forty days and forty nights it took to reach the Mountain of God.

The connection with today's Gospel is that God provides what we need for the journey of life. The journey that we are on is the same journey Elijah was on: it's the journey to fulfill the will of God.

Today's Gospel begins with a negative reference to another journey. It mentioned that the people were murmuring that Jesus did not have the right to say that he was the bread that came down from heaven. Great word: murmur. It's like grumbling only worse. It's the sound Mom hears when she serves liver for dinner. The entire Exodus account presents the people of Israel as murmuring against Moses. Jesus catches the people and says, "Stop the murmuring. You have it in prophecy that a time will come when the people will be taught by God. That time is now. This is different than the days of Moses. Those people ate Manna and died. I have food which will last you on the journey of life, food that is forever."

Then Jesus says, "I am the living Bread that came down from heaven."

Do you remember how the *Gospel of John* began? The beautiful prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" centers on one line: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Word came down from heaven. The Bread of Life came down from heaven. This was two

ways of saying the same thing. Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life, the Word Made Flesh, the Food for the Journey."

During his life on earth, Jesus nurtured the deep intimate love he had with the Father. He realized that he had to lead all people into this same intimacy. We often refer to Jesus as coming to establish the Kingdom of God. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* emphasizes that Jesus is the Kingdom. Union with him is in fact union with the Kingdom of God.

OK, this is all fine theology, but what is it saying to us? It is saying that God has an overwhelming love for each of us. St. Catherine of Sienna put it this way, "Don't you understand? God is running after you day and night as though he has nothing better to do than occupy himself with you." Or, again, as I mentioned in my homily a few weeks ago, "God is so great that he created four and a half billion people and treats each one as an only child."

Jesus realizes the struggles of our lives. He sees the journey that each of us is on. He knows that we often have to flee from forces that wish to destroy us. These forces could be the materialism of the world, the licentiousness of a godless society, various addictions and sicknesses that we may or may not be responsible for, etc. He knows that we get depressed at times. There are plenty of times that we want to join Elijah under the broom tree and say, "Enough, I can't take it anymore."

We might want to give up, but he doesn't let us. "I have food for the journey," the Lord says. "I am the food for the journey. I am the Bread of Life that gives you the strength you need." God won't let us give up. He loves us too much.

The Eucharist, communion, is the sacramental reception of the Bread of Life. Food for the journey, the Eucharist, Jesus, it's all the same. When we receive communion we take the Love of God, Jesus Christ, within us.

And God's love gets us through,
through trials,
through periods of self doubt,
through sickness,
through the death of our loved ones,
through our own physical deaths,
through the attacks of society,
through attacks by our inner demons.
God's love gets us through.

Jesus wins. Jesus always wins.