

The Rev. Nancy Miller  
Proper 14, Year B  
1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

May the words of our lips and the fabric of our lives be songs of thanks and praise to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many of you heard me say last week that my idea of 'roughing it' is either a black and white TV - with no cable - in a five star hotel, or the maid forgetting to leave a mint on the pillow - in that same five star hotel. I'm just not an outdoorsy, camping out, kind of person.

That being the case, I cannot imagine what Elijah must have endured as we heard in today's first lesson, from the first Book of Kings. Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, which was, apparently, so grim that he asked if he might die. He had gone into the desert to escape some pretty grim stuff but it certainly seemed as though he had encountered a situation that was at least as grim, if not more so. And if we didn't get our fill of grim stuff in the first lesson, in the second reading appointed for today, from the Letter to the Ephesians we get beaten over the head with do's and don't's and oughts and shoulds .

“Put away falsehood, ... do not sin, ... don't let the sun go down on your anger, ... let no evil talk come out of your mouths, .... put away all bitterness and slander and malice.” That sounds to me like a lot of rules and regulations. Yuck!

Whether it's from the Bible, like 'honor thy father and thy mother' and that thou shall not steal', or whether it's from day-to-day life, like: clean your room, study hard, work hard, and don't cheat on your taxes, what we tend to hear in those do's and don'ts and oughts and shoulds are the things that sound negative and unpleasant. But that's not the whole story; that's not even the main point of the story - either in today's appointed lessons, or in our story as the people of God. To be sure it was more than understandable for Elijah - as it is for us - to focus on what wasn't so great. And in fairness to Elijah - and often for us, too, the circumstances weren't easy.

But God has another idea - a different way to hear. Instead of wondering first why things are so tough, why not listen instead with an ear for how blessed we are. After all, when Elijah woke up, there was a cake and a jar of water waiting for him.

What God is up to, I am convinced, is raising up and rejoicing in, and endowing with every blessing people of God's own choosing - first Elijah, called to be a prophet, and now the likes of us, called forth in baptism. The problem is that the path to that place of every blessing is often through terrain that doesn't look all that promising. And so we what we tend to do is to search for every blessing on our terms. We think we can find the way to those blessings on some cushy path of our own devising.

But where we end up is lost and burdened and much more mindful of the trials of life than of God's promise of life abundant. And we blind ourselves to the wonder and fullness that God wants and hopes for us. God intends that we will live in that good place, where we may eat without scarcity and lack nothing, where we may indeed walk in love, as Christ loved us. God wants to give us the Promised Land.

Indeed, God has given us the every blessing through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Promised Land, the Good Life, the life that really matters and truly satisfies, is a by-product of our life with God, and how that life is lived in whatever desert we traverse: how that life is lived with God day after day, week in and week out. That can be as simple as saying grace before meals, or as complex as reading the newspapers, not only to find out what's happening, but also so we'll know how to pray. Maybe it's the ball player with a drug problem who needs our prayers, or a police department in trouble, or a country embroiled in civil war.

Or maybe it's a day that dawns bright and beautiful and full of wonderful possibilities, that merits telling God in prayer just how thankful we are. That's not to say that life isn't full of wilderness; of course it is. But we are never without the strength and power and comfort of God. That was certainly the case for the Elijah. Despite his wilderness setting and all its challenges, Elijah ate and drank and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, because God was with him every step of the way. Like Elijah, we often encounter massive challenges. But we're in a different boat. Because we've seen that God is with us. We've touched his wounds; we've let him wash our feet; we've even broken bread with him.

Unlikely as it sometimes seems, the Promised Land is all around us, here and now because God is with us, here and now and because our lives are rooted in God's grace even here and now, when life often seems like a wilderness. And we discover the Promised Land - that full and abundant life - by rejoicing that God is near, here and now by rejoicing in God's care and companionship, and by rejoicing that God endows us with every blessing.

May the words of our lips, and the very fabric of our lives be songs of thanks and praise for that steadfast presence of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.