

## Bread in the Wilderness

### 1 Kgs 19:4-8

Elijah went a day's journey into the desert,  
until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it.

He prayed for death saying:

“This is enough, O LORD!

Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”

He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree,  
but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.

Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake  
and a jug of water.

After he ate and drank, he lay down again,  
but the angel of the LORD came back a second time,  
touched him, and ordered,

“Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!”

He got up, ate, and drank;

then strengthened by that food,

he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.

### Exodus 16

“the one who had gathered a large amount did not have too much, and the one who had gathered a small amount did not have too little. They gathered as much as each needed to eat....

“Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy sabbath of the LORD. Whatever you want to bake, bake; whatever you want to boil, boil; but whatever is left put away and keep until the morning.... Six days you will gather it, but on the seventh day, the sabbath, it will not be there. Still, on the seventh day some of the people went out to gather it, but they did not find any. Then the LORD said to Moses: How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my instructions?”

“Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life,\* which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.”

### Jn 6:41-51

Amen, amen, I say to you,

whoever believes has eternal life.

I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;

this is the bread that comes down from heaven

so that one may eat it and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven;

whoever eats this bread will live forever;

and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

The readings today focus on food. In the first reading from Kings we learn of Elijah’s struggle as prophet of Israel. In this story, Elijah was in flight, fearful that he’d be killed either by King Ahab, of the northern kingdom of Israel, or by his own people who, like the Israelites in the wilderness, complained that life was too difficult following Elijah’s God. Elijah then gave up, collapsing under the broom tree and determined to fast to death, he cried:

““This is enough, O LORD!

Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’

He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree,

but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.”

The food he ate, provided by God through an angel, sustained him. Clearly, God wasn’t finished with him yet. So, Elijah was once again commissioned by God to carry on leading the people of Israel. Elijah learned, the hard way, that his life was completely dependent on God, the source of everything.

In today’s gospel, John, chapter 6, Jesus refers to himself as the Bread of Life. He urges his followers, shortly after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, to depend completely on him. He says to them:

“I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;

this is the bread that comes down from heaven

so that one may eat it and not die.”

Unlike Elijah’s hearth cake and the manna in the wilderness that physically sustained the Israelites in their interminable traverse through the desert, Jesus refers to himself as the “food” that will sustain for life everlasting. We are called to be completely dependent on Jesus, to be nourished for eternal life.

Currently, I’m spending my summer in the Grand Tetons, a magnificent place providing a daily feast for my senses with its majestic mountains, crashing cascades and the truly awesome animals who make their home here. I regularly hike, sometimes taking long hikes into the mountains. It’s only during a long and arduous hike that I realize how essential food is to sustaining me on my journey. When I’m really hungry and thirsty ten miles away from civilization I find myself having a tremendous appreciation for what makes my body go on. After being drained by hunger, food not only sustains but energizes. The physical emptiness and subsequent satiation with hydration and food can be quite

enlightening on the relevance of the Bread of Life. While at home, within arm's length of the frig at all times, I never realize the *need* I have to sustain myself. Whereas miles into the mountains, "the wilderness," away from any food and water sources, food becomes quite relevant. Just as I've become aware of my absolute need for physical food to keep my body going, I'm becoming aware of my total need for Jesus' Word, Truth, Life as my forever-sustenance.

The manna/ bread in the Israelites' wilderness journey was a foreshadowing, of Jesus. After Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000, they wanted Him to "give (them) this bread always" ([John 6:34](#)). But Jesus tried to get their attention off of physical bread and onto the true "bread of life."

"Truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the One who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. . . . I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" ([John 6:32-35](#)).

Sadly, the people could not get their minds off of physical bread long enough to understand the spiritual truth Jesus was declaring ([John 6:36-59](#)). They were more concerned with the condition of their stomachs than the condition of their souls. But this lesson is very much ours today to ponder.

Jesus proclaimed: "Your fathers and mothers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" ([John 6:49-50](#)).

The manna temporarily saved the Israelites from physical death, just as the hearth cake reinvigorated Elijah. But Jesus, our spiritual manna, saves us from eternal death. Just as God provided manna to the Israelites, God has provided us Jesus for the sustenance of our lives everlasting.

*Cathy Hartrich*