

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

11 Pentecost, Proper 14, August 8, 2021

READINGS:

I Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35. 41-51

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes, it is all about the bread.

Oh, yummy! There is nothing like the aroma of freshly baked bread! Whole wheat, rye, French baguette, bagel, cinnamon swirl, hush puppies, corn tortillas, oatcake, white butter top, pita - the list is long, and we all have our favorites. For centuries, since people first learned to plant and harvest and cook grains, bread has been the "Staff of Life" in many cultures around the world.

It's no surprise, then, to find that scripture, both Old Testament and New, is full of references to bread. We have been hearing quite a few "bread stories" in our Sunday readings recently. Two weeks ago, we heard about Jesus feeding a crowd from a little boy's lunch box. Last week, we heard about God feeding the Israelites with manna on their wilderness journey, and Jesus telling the crowd he had fed the day before about the true bread that endures for eternal life.

Bread provides energy. Remember the first bite of that peanut butter and jelly or tuna sandwich from your lunch bucket at school? I don't know about you, but just that first taste, in the lunch room or my classroom, seemed to pep me up for the afternoon's activities!

In our reading from First Kings today, the prophet Elijah definitely needs an energy boost! He has just won a contest with 450 prophets of a god called Baal. The God of Israel won the contest easily, but Elijah did great violence against the surviving prophets anyway. Now, he is on the run from Queen Jezebel, who wants revenge for his actions. "Lord, just let me die, already," he prays. "I'm not any better than my ancestors!"

But God has other plans, and an angel brings bread baked on hot stones and a water jar, wakes Elijah, and tells him to get up and eat. He does, and falls asleep again. The second time the angel wakes him, he tells him "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Elijah eats and drinks a second time, and is so strengthened by his meal that he travels forty days and forty nights to reach Mount Sinai, the mountain of God.

Eat, or the journey will be too much for you!

There are certain kinds of bread that are known for traveling well.

For centuries a bread known as "hardtack" or "biscuit" was a staple food of traveling armies and navies. Made from just three ingredients (flour, water, and salt), and baked hard as a flat cracker-like square, it will keep for years if stored properly. It does need to be soaked in broth, or stew, or coffee before eating. Otherwise, damage to the teeth is likely, as it really IS very hard. And, it is not the best tasting bread ever!

In the early United States, native Americans showed the newcomers from Europe how to plant, harvest, and cook corn. Journey (or Johnny) cake made from cornmeal, salt, and water was a travel food of choice. The ingredients could be carried in a saddlebag on long trips and baked in a skillet along the way.

Interestingly, both hardtack and journey cake are experiencing a comeback. They are popular with campers and especially with hikers, since they are inexpensive, light to carry, and full of energy.

Eat, or the physical journey will be too much for you!

In John's Gospel today, we hear Jesus talking not about a physical journey, but a spiritual one. A very long journey indeed - the one to eternal life. Those on this journey also require bread. And the bread they need is him!

"I am the bread that came down from heaven," he tells his neighbors. They are upset. They think they already know who he is and what he can do - after all, they have watched him grow up. They know his father and mother, so they are just sure he could not have "come down from heaven."

Jesus does not give up. He explains again what he means, using as an example the manna given by God to the Israelites to strengthen them on their forty year journey to the promised land. He reminds them that those who ate the manna long ago died. Not so, he says, for those who believe in him! "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," he tells them. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Eat, or the spiritual journey home to God will be too much for you!

At his last meal with his disciples before his death, Jesus provided them, and all his disciples since, with the bread they need for their spiritual journey. Week by week, we gather to make Eucharist and be fed and strengthened for our travels. It's a good thing for us, I think, that Jesus has provided bread for our journey. If he had not, I am convinced that our journeys would indeed be "too much" for us. Elijah was tired, and we can get tired, too. Our journey as Christian people takes work! Just listen to what Saint Paul says to the church at Ephesus in our reading today:

Imitate God, he tells us. Live in love, as Christ loved us. Forgive, as God in Christ forgives us. Speak the truth. Don't sin. Work so you will have things to share with others. Speak only about useful things, things that build up the body, so your words give grace to those who hear them. Put away negative things like bitterness, wrath, anger, arguments, and slander. Be kind to each other.

These are not easy things for us to do, are they? Imitate God. Speak only to build up. Put away anger. Be kind. Don't sin. These are pretty high energy activities, and they take cooperation and concentration from us, AND we all know we won't succeed at them all the time!

But week by week, the Lord who knows us so well just keeps on packing our lunch boxes and waiting at the altar for us to come and take him into ourselves and be strengthened to try again. Elijah needed food for his physical journey to Mount Sinai. We need food for our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. The bread of life in our lunch boxes will nourish us for the spiritual journey ahead, as we follow in the footsteps of our Lord.

So eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you!

Oh yummy! Bread really is SO good!

Sometimes, though, it can be all about the toppings!

In your bulletin today you will find a recipe for a Bible spice mixture. It is great on buttered toast, or fruit, or even tapioca pudding.

Give yourself a little extra treat this week. As you enjoy it, remember to taste and see that the Lord is good!

Amen.