

*Flagging Faith*, 1 Kings 19:1-8; John 6:35-51

Pastor Judy Bangsund

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A few weeks ago, I was talking with an inmate in jail, whom I will call DeeDee, for reasons of confidentiality. It was the first time I'd been able to see her in more than a year, because of Covid. DeeDee is one of the inmates that I am discipling, a person who had shown rare faith and leadership capabilities, such that we consider her a 24/7 inside chaplain.

DeeDee's story is remarkable. From the first time I met her, she had an aura of calm. I think she is naturally the kind of personality that exudes calm, one to whom children and other vulnerable people would be drawn to. But what was remarkable was that she also had extraordinary peace, for someone in jail – separated from home and family, and whose future is unsure. She herself commented on it, over and over, what *peace* she had, ever since she had recognized that God has control over her life. Having given her life to Christ, she became the faith leader in her pod, leading her “ladies” in morning and evening prayer, and reading Scripture and devotions with them daily. If, for whatever reason, they missed a devotion, the ladies would prompt DeeDee to read to them. Guards would assign newcomers to her pod, if there was space; because they knew that the newcomer would be welcomed and cared for by DeeDee and the others – which is not the case, normally, since newcomers tend to disrupt the status quo. Over a period of some years I met with DeeDee weekly, and that extraordinary peace never left her.

Until just a few weeks ago. Her sentencing date was coming up, and this rattled her (naturally so. Everyone fears prison. And court appearances can be hard.) She was troubled, not only by what the prosecuting attorney might say, but also by being confronted by those she had harmed in the past. In the meantime, there was chaos in her pod, accompanied by many demands for her attention. She was just at the end of her rope. Her faith was flagging. She had run out of juice.

DeeDee's story reminded me of Elijah's – the story you have just heard. In this story, Elijah is fearing for his life, running away. What was going on in the life of this great prophet of God, a man whose physical strength was only matched by his

strength of faith? If you read chapter 18, you'll get the back story. It is a remarkable story of power and faith, and some of you will remember it. Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest: whose god was stronger? Even more deeply: which god was the only true God? You need to know that the kings of Israel had been moving the nation towards apostasy (such that this is one of the three times in Scripture when miracles abound – the other two times being the Exodus and the time of Jesus and the early church). Ahab was the current king, and his wife was the evil, very powerful Queen Jezebel, a dedicated follower of Baal. Baal worship was becoming the norm, and the nation of Israel was on the knife's edge of decision: would it be Yahweh (the God of Abraham), or Baal?

Just to give this contest a little perspective, you should know that Israel was now in her third year of drought, a condition predicted by Elijah. Jezebel had been systematically killing off all the prophets of God, and had a contract out for Elijah's life. Into this dire situation Elijah courageously went to Ahab and challenged him to a duel – that is, 450 prophets of Baal (and others) against Elijah, the lone prophet of God. The contest was arranged in this way: a sacrifice would be set up to each god, and the god that sent fire to consume the sacrifice would be accepted as Israel's god. You remember the story. All day long the 450 prophets of Baal called on their god to send fire; they leaped and danced and even began to cut themselves in their fervor. Around noon Elijah began to taunt them: "Shout louder! Maybe he's asleep or gone on vacation!" The account reads, in vs 29: "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention."

By evening, the prophets of Baal were done. Exhausted, they signaled Elijah's turn. Elijah then built the altar, laid on wood, added the sacrifice and then he poured bucket after bucket after bucket of water over the sacrifice, the wood and the stones until it overflowed into the trench that he had dug. In short, the sacrifice was soaked. // And then Elijah prayed a very brief prayer ending with the words, "Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Immediately fire from heaven consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the soil – and licked up the water in the trench. In the melee that followed, Elijah had all 450 prophets of Baal killed. And THEN: rain came to drench the land. The contest was settled, well and good. Yahweh is God. There is none other.

That's where our reading for today picks up the story. Jezebel hears about the contest and threatens Elijah's life. Elijah was afraid and ran.

Now, just stop and think about that for a minute. Afraid? AFRAID? After that contest, that show of God's power? It seems illogical, but Elijah had been fighting on his own, against the power of Jezebel *for years*. And apparently, the war still wasn't over.

So, what does God do? Does he rebuke his faithful prophet for his lack of faith? I want you to pay close attention to what happens next. Elijah travels all day and then lies down to rest. He is weary and dejected; he prays that he might die. "I'm so done, Lord. Please take my life; I'm no better than anyone else."

And here's what happens next:

Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So, he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. (1 Kings 18:5-8)

I find it interesting that God doesn't just send Elijah a ready-made loaf of bread. No; he bakes it near Elijah's head, so that he wakes up smelling the fragrance of fresh bread. Can't you just smell it? Is there anything like the fragrance of homemade bread? I remember, once when staying with Jim's parents on a home leave, my mother-in-law baked bread, so that it was hot out of the oven, the house filled with the fragrance of that yeasty deliciousness, just when the children came home from school (something she had done many times a generation earlier, with her own children). It was more than an after-school snack. It was the fragrance and taste of compassion, of love.

*That's* what God did for his prophet, when his faith was flagging. God showed him gentleness and compassion – demonstrating that he is not only a powerful God, but a loving, caring God. He gave his exhausted prophet strength for the journey, at whose end God would meet him on the mountain -- not in the wind, earthquake or fire, but in a still, small voice -- to address all Elijah's concerns. God told Elijah that there were yet 7000 faithful followers in Israel; Elijah was not alone. Elisha would take up the mantle of office, removing from Elijah's shoulders his burdens. And finally, God would take Elijah to himself, in a chariot of fire. God was faithful! Even when Elijah's faith was at a low ebb. And, as a result of

God's work through Elijah and Elisha, Israel was kept – barely – from going over the edge to total Baal worship.

I wonder if you are in such a place today – like Elijah or like my friend DeeDee -- when you are at the end of your rope. When it's hard to believe, to keep on believing. Perhaps, in a world where a pandemic doesn't seem to end, drought and fire (and floods!) threaten our state, when there is uncertainty around school, jobs – you fill in the blanks – you are just tired, discouraged. Whatever it is, my friend, you are not alone. God knows who you are; he knows you are human, and that you, like all of us, are subject to fear and doubt. We get tired; at times it all seems to be too much.

But here is the good news: you are given bread for the journey. And it's not just regular bread – not even home-baked bread – but *living* bread. Jesus has expanded and deepened our understanding of who God is, by coming into our chaotic, imperfect world as a human being, himself subject to hunger, fear, weariness, pain and – yes, even death. In our Gospel reading today Jesus identifies himself as the great "I AM," the name God himself gave to Moses from the burning bush. Throughout the book of John God's name, I AM (or Yahweh), is expanded by Jesus, who said: *I am* the light of the world, the good shepherd, the living water, the bread of life. I AM; and whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life.

I want you to know today, dear friends, that this is a simple, child-like trust kind of faith. It is as simple as a willingness to believe, a softening of the heart to receive God, to receive faith. It might be only the size of a mustard seed, but in the hands of the Holy Spirit, it can grow to be fairly substantial, even as powerful as the faith of Elijah.

It is the Holy Spirit who grants and nourishes faith. It's not something you can sort of wish into being, or pull up by your bootstraps. It's more of a cry, like that of the father of the demon-possessed boy, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" And God works with that – even such a mix of belief and unbelief; of faith and doubt.

Flagging faith. It happens, even to the best of us; even to a faith giant like Elijah. It happens, even to a faith-filled woman in jail who has found extraordinary peace in Christ, whose peace, I'm happy to say, was restored after hearing of God's graciousness to Elijah. When that happens to you, remember the bread. Whenever you smell bread baking; whenever you take of the bread at Communion – the very body of Christ -- remember God's care and love for you. He is faithful! And he never abandons you. In fact, he freely gives you eternal life. Amen.