

“Strength for the Journey”

“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Anyone who drives on Interstate 95 south to Florida has encountered the memorable billboards for South of the Border, which appear hours before a traveler reaches the North Carolina – South Carolina border. South of the Border is a very unique rest stop that has been described as “an amalgam of Dixie and Old Mexico.” At its center is Pedro, a 97 foot sign of a grinning character that is claimed to be the largest freestanding sign east of the Mississippi River. Below Pedro are acres of motels, restaurants, souvenir shops, fireworks stores, miniature golf, and other features that defy description. The billboards that seek to entice travelers to stop at South of the Border are as memorable as the site itself; they include such catchy phrases as “You never sausage a place!”, “Pedro’s weather report: Chili today, hot tamale!”, “Keep yelling kids (they’ll stop)”, and my personal favourite: **“Eat here and get gas.”**

There are, of course, two ways to understand this last slogan. It can either be encouraging a traveler to stop at South of the Border to both get fuel for their vehicles and a meal for themselves, or perhaps it’s a warning about the aftereffects of those meals. Whatever its true meaning may be, it is an encouragement for drivers to take a break from the long drive south to the Sunshine State to get fuel not only for their vehicles, but also sustenance for themselves so that they can continue their journey successfully.

No matter where you may be traveling, it is wise to take frequent rest stops along the way. Travel experts recommend taking a break every few hours, even if you don’t feel tired, to stretch your legs and get something to eat so that you are refreshed and more alert to continue your journey. A fatigued and hungry driver can be a danger not only to themselves but to other travelers; as a car has a limited range in which it can travel without refueling, so also do we have our limits that we need to understand and respect if we are going to arrive safely at our destination. Drivers who ignore these limits, who try to make a long journey with minimal stops, may soon discover that they have run out of energy long before their car runs out of gas.

If there is anyone who appears to be immune to these human limitations, it is the prophet Elijah, who in most accounts appears to possess superhuman qualities. The prophet is first introduced in 1 Kings as a man from “Tishbe in Gilead” in the Northern Kingdom who announces the coming of a disastrous drought to King Ahab (*“As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”* – 1 Kings 17:1). Elijah possesses the ability to perform miracles, which is evidenced when he visits a widow in Zarephath, a Phoenician city between Sidon and Tyre, proclaiming to her *“thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth ... The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.”* (17:14, 16). Elijah also revives the widow’s son, prompting the widow to proclaim that *“now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”* (17:24). After Ahab marries Jezebel, who introduces the worship of the Canaanite god Baal into the royal household (*“he took as his wife Jezebel ... and went and served Baal, and worshiped him... Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”* – 16:31-33), Elijah confronts the king and challenges the priests of Baal to a contest in which Elijah is triumphant (*“When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.’”* – 18:39). Elijah’s narrative ends when he is taken up into heaven (*“a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.”* – 2 Kings 2:11). In the New Testament, Elijah appears along with Moses at Jesus’ Transfiguration (*“And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.”* – Mark 9:4), and is mentioned by the disciples as one with whom the crowds identify Jesus (*“And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others*

Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” – Matthew 16:14). Through Elijah, *“Israel was given a deeper understanding of the implications of the covenant and of Yahweh’s ways in history.”* (Bernhard Anderson).

As amazing as Elijah’s abilities and accomplishments may be, today’s First Lesson reminds us that Elijah is also a human being whose strength can be easily depleted. Despite his triumph over the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel, Elijah is forced to flee for his life after a furious Jezebel declares *“so may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”* (19:2). Elijah leaves his servant in Beersheba, which is under the control of Judah and well beyond Jezebel’s reach, and ventures into the wilderness beyond Judah – and here Elijah collapses under a “solitary broom tree,” with both his strength and his hope completely spent. Elijah is so worn out and discouraged that he asks God to take his life: *“He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’”* (19:4). His cry is that it is all “too much” (*“I have had enough, LORD”* – NIV), and that he is no better than his forebears – either his relatives or his predecessors in prophetic ministry. Elijah may have in mind Moses, who in a similar situation also asks the Lord to let him die (*“I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favor in your sight – and do not let me see my misery.”* – Numbers 11:14-15.) Like those who have gone before him, Elijah feels that he is left with too much to bear on his own.

Elijah believes that his journey had ended in failure. He is completely spent, totally out of energy, unable to take another step. The weight of responsibility has become too much to bear for one human being – even one as seemingly strong as Elijah. By himself he cannot go on, and sees no future other than one of eternal rest. Elijah has given up on himself – but God hasn’t given up on Elijah. As he is about to close his eyes for what he believes is the last time, *“suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’”* (19:5). When he raises his head and opens his eyes, he finds *“there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water.”* (19:6) – not what one would expect to find in the desert. The Hebrew word for “hot stones” (*resapim*) is rare, found elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Isaiah 6:6, where it is the “hot coal” that the seraph takes from the altar and touches Isaiah’s lips in response to the prophet’s expression of unworthiness to accept the Lord’s commission:

- “And I said, ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” – Isaiah 6:5-8.

The word used for “jar” (*sappahat*) is also uncommon in the Old Testament. It is found only in two other passages:

- “The LORD forbid that I should raise my hand against the LORD’s anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go.” – 1 Samuel 26:11.
- “The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.” – 1 Kings 17:16.

Elijah eats and drinks from the provisions that have been provided for him through these extraordinary means, but then he lays down again, not recognizing the purpose of this food and drink. The angel’s second pronouncement clarifies that this is from the Lord: *“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”* (19:7). Elijah is commanded to accept the nourishment that the Lord provides in the wilderness so that he may be strengthened to journey *“to Horeb the mount of God.”* (19:8).

- “The intent of the miracle story in verses 5-8 is to affirm that in [Elijah’s] darkest hour Yahweh did not desert him, but mercifully supplied him with strength for the long journey that would lead to a new and keener sense of the sovereignty of God.” – Anderson.

Elijah collapses and wishes to die because he has no strength left to continue his journey – but God supplies him with what he needs to get up and continue down the path upon which the Lord directs him. Elijah believes that there is no future for him – but God shows him that he has a future because it is God’s future. Even a prophet with seemingly superhuman qualities cannot accomplish all that God has entrusted to him on his own; it is only *“in the strength of that food”* that God supplies that Elijah is able to be the instrument through which God’s Word is proclaimed and God’s will is accomplished through the efforts of this gifted but very human prophet.

Elijah’s story serves as both a lesson and a warning to us about the dangers of trying to accomplish everything on our own, of what can happen when we ignore our human limitations and push ourselves to the brink of exhaustion. On a long journey, rest stops call us to stop and nourish ourselves; but often we drive past them, thinking that we are not in need of refreshment and renewal. Our doctors teach us the importance of leading balanced lives to get adequate rest and nutrition so that we can function more effectively; but too often we ignore this advice, thinking we are above the need for taking care of our bodies to the point where our health and our productiveness suffer. The Lord’s commandment to *“remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy”* reminds us that rest has been built into the very foundations of creation; yet how often do we fill this day with chores, activities, and busyness to the point where instead of being a day in which our bodies and spirits are renewed, the “day of rest” becomes another day in which our energies are spent and we find ourselves like Elijah, collapsing in despair and unable to take another step. We delude ourselves into thinking that we are *“tough, you think you’ve got the stuff, you’re telling me and anyone you’re hard enough,”* but the moment will soon arrive when we need to hear the good news that *“you don’t have to put up a fight, you don’t have to always be right, let me take some of the punches for you tonight ... Sometimes you can’t make it on your own.”* (“Sometimes You Can’t Make It On Your Own” – U2). When we find ourselves in that place where we can’t take another step, when we know we cannot make it on our own, when we are about to give up all hope and lay down for what we may think is the final time – that is the time when God comes to us as the Lord appeared to Elijah in his hour of doubt and sorrow, supplying us as he supplied Elijah with *“everything he needed for what would come next, and to let Elijah know that there would BE a ‘next.’”*

- “But you know when *you* can’t take one more step, God can ... you’re not left alone. Know that God has sent angels to minister to you (they could even be sitting right next to you this morning). And that angel challenges you even now: ‘Get up and eat ... you’ll need strength for the journey that is ahead of you.’ It’s okay to feel uncertain, but take the nourishment that God offers – because no matter how it feels, or what you’ve lost, or what you’re dreading, or what you’ve done, God has a plan for you. You’re not done yet Elijah – Get up, eat.” – Linda Fabian Pepe.

As we seek to be faithful to fulfilling what God has entrusted to us, we have to acknowledge that we cannot accomplish this on our own. Luther reminds us that *“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him”* (*Small Catechism*), that is we seek to do God’s Will apart from God’s presence and God’s empowerment that our strength will very quickly be spent. As the disciples were instructed by the Risen Lord to *“stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”* (Luke 24:49), we have to acknowledge our reliance upon God to provide with the strength and nourishment we need to continue what God has set before us and to continue on the journey that will reach its destination when our Lord calls us to our eternal home.

As rest stops along the highway fuel both our automobiles and our bodies so that the journey can continue, the rest stop that is the Lord’s Day provides us with the rest and renewal that we need so that when we are dismissed to “go in peace, serve the Lord,” we can depart as an energized people who know that we can *“accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine”* (Ephesians 3:20). Amen