

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
August 12, 2018; 1 Kings 19:4-8; John 6:35, 41-48  
The Bread of Life  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Food in the summer can taste especially good – if you have a garden you know there is nothing better than a sun-warmed tomato right off the vine. This year my cherry tomatoes have done well – only one plant but it's overloaded with fruit! Every day I go out and pick those little red beauties – hopefully before the squirrels get them – and every day by the time I get inside there are maybe 2 - 3 left in my hand. I just can't seem to resist the sweetness of these tomatoes!

And even if there's no garden in your backyard or on your deck, we have the benefit of some great farmers' markets in this area – doesn't it make a difference when your sweet corn is picked early in the morning and on your table that same day! That's what I remember from my childhood – it's one of the special joys of summer!

We spend much more time outside in the summer too – at least when the humidity drops to a bearable level - and I know it's a time when I can become much more aware of the beauty of God's creation. We've had some really hard rainstorms lately, haven't we – often when the sun is out at my house it's still raining over Newark – almost always I can look out from my deck and see spectacular rainbows – even a double rainbow – it never fails to remind me of the promise of the rainbow covenant God has made to Noah and to us – the promise of new life, the promise that we'll never be alone. And it leads me to offer a simple prayer – thank you God!

Have you ever gone on a long hike up a mountain path that didn't seem nearly so steep on the map? We get achier and achier, hungrier and hungrier, more tired by the minute, one foot in front of the other and we wonder if we'll ever get to the top. At last the trail begins to level out - the summit -- and your picnic spot - approaches and you see a view more spectacular than you could have imagined down there at the beginning of the trail. You are tired but relieved, exhilarated and awestruck by where God has led you and what you see unfolding in front of you. A land of such abundance - flowing with milk and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. So you sit and savor the

majesty before you: climb that mountain and nothing tastes better than the simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich you packed that got a little squished in your backpack. And the cool drink you enjoy – a real gift.

There are other summer images of abundance: think of children dancing in the spray of water at a pool or in the back yard, or the ice cream truck that drives through the neighborhood, the music playing – children and adults lining up for that cold treat. Think of free concerts in city parks. Think of lush, colorful gardens, the aroma of roses or lilies in the air, especially on these so humid days. Think of the smell of bread right out of the oven, standing on the sidewalk outside a bakery.

Images like all of these might be the ones used if the Bible were written today: images of abundance and grace, ordinary, simple and ever-available.

Maybe our slower summer pace helps us to see around us the ordinary that's there all the time. Maybe like when we come to the top of that steep path, it's a kind of time out, a wilderness we need to enter to rejuvenate, restore, re-create, renew our relationship with God and God's good creation.

The story of Elijah and his time in the wilderness is our story too. All of us have times when we need to pull back, go into our cave, and maybe like Elijah, fall asleep under a tree. Elijah had had just about enough – his life wasn't going well – he was on the run – he was in fear for his very life.

But then the angel of the Lord came, touched him, not once, but twice and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And the food and drink he needed was right there in front of him.

I hear people too often, mostly during the school year when schedules are crazy, running from one thing to another, hardly time to take a breath – these people will sometimes sigh deeply and say, "Why do we live like this? It's almost too much."

Somehow the summer time gives us permission to take that breath, to enjoy the ordinary, simple pleasures of life. Maybe we realize we really are in fear for our very lives – not the same way as Elijah on the run because he was in deep trouble for murder – but our anxieties, our fears and worries for the future, illness in our family, any number of things that have us uneasy, or when we're trying to make a major decision – maybe summertime is when we too might relax enough to fall asleep under a tree where an angel of the Lord will touch our shoulder. And it just might be then when it's quiet enough that we'll hear those words, "Get up and eat – otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And we awaken and see the food we need right in front of us.

Listen to and feel the power of that statement. Our liberation that lies in that statement. We don't have to make the journey alone, in fact, we can't! We can stop trying because we simply can't do it all ourselves. We're human. And we're hungry – hungry for the bread of life.

One gift of the summer just might be the gift of time – time to recharge, a time to get our relationship straight with our God, a time to listen for that voice calling to us, a time to savor God's presence, to get our perspective straight. A time to clear our heads, to pay attention to the ordinary, simple things. And then to offer God a simple prayer of thanks for the abundance we all have.

Elijah felt alone and frightened. He went off and sat under a tree – his cave this time. But the angel of the Lord touched him. And God has touched us too. Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, has come to us and shared our common lot. And just as the angel of the Lord urged Elijah to eat to give him strength for his journey, Jesus invites and urges us to share a meal to give us strength for our journey. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

You may recognize this verse from last week – yes, the lectionary gives us partially the same reading this week again. That certainly tells us it's important – in fact, I believe this is the core of our faith – who is Jesus? I am the bread of life. Using such a familiar image, Jesus tells us who he is and shows the promise he brings to each one of us. That's why I've put out the chalice and the plate today on the Table even though this is not a Communion Sunday – these symbols remind us of who we are and whose we are as well as providing the strength for the journey we all face.

No where in any of these texts are we told that the journey will be easy. Nowhere in these texts are we promised that things will always be wonderful. What we are promised is this: that we will receive strength for the journey. That God will touch us, and if we respond, if we waken to God's presence, we will find our way. I'm not sure that – in fact, I'm convinced that, we don't always get answers to our questions. Why does this happen to me or to a loved one. Too often those answers are God's alone and that fact can make our journey so long and hard.

Sometimes, though, we do get the answers: maybe events are the result of bad choices. Maybe it's an act of nature. But often there just isn't an answer and it's then that our faith can sustain us. That if we awaken to God's presence around us, and in us, and through us, we can get a strength we never knew was possible.

God comes to us with an invitation to get up and eat, knowing the journey will be too much for us. Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever been in your cave and received a phone call? A letter? An email? Or heard your doorbell ring – and found a friend there who'd just stopped by? It's so comforting, even freeing, to realize that we're not alone – that the presence and love of God surrounds us in most wonderful and sometimes surprising ways. It takes practice, I think, to recognize that presence but it's so worthwhile – what a gift it can be when we need it most.

So, come to the table – feast your eyes on the symbols in front of us. Come and receive the strength of the presence of God. Join with each other and for these few moments, know that we are one in union, one with another. One with the Bread of life. Receive and believe the promise of never hungering or thirsting again.

Rest for a moment. Simply be in the presence. Let those concerns and anxieties and fears – whatever weighs you down – let them go just for a moment. Go with Elijah into the wilderness, sit under a tree, climb into a cave.

But then feel the touch on your shoulder. Take and eat and drink and let the presence flow into you. And then, like Elijah, let us get up, be nourished, and in the strength of this food, in the promise of the abundance of this food, let's continue on our journey.

Enjoy the summer. Enjoy the abundance of the summer – and savor the abundance of God's unfailing love that's here all year round – if we take the time to see it. And out of that abundance we are called to respond in love.

Savor those fresh tomatoes. Stop and look at the rainbows. Taste and see that God is good. Hear Jesus' words: those who believe in me shall never be hungry, never thirst. And then have another sandwich. Take another drink from the stream. Get another ice cream cone. There is more than enough to go around. Amen!

Let us pray: O God, we are grateful for every way that you feed us: in the grace that surrounds us, in gifts of true friends, and for the world around us that delights us with food and flowers, with birdsong and sunlight.

Be the bread of life for us today. Help us to open our lives to you now for nurture and grace, for wisdom and truth. Help us to feel your touch, to respond to your touch, and to reach out and extend your touch to others in their own pilgrimage. Thanks be to you, O God! In the name of your son, our redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

