

**“Bread - Part II: The Faith Exchange”**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - 8.8.2021 - I Kings 19:4-8; Jn 6:35, 41-51/B**

Today is Story Day. I’m going to share with you a handful of modern-day parables - teaching stories - from our everyday lives as Christians. In them, you will find yourselves, your neighborhood, our Advent community and the whole world around us. It’s my hope that you will also feel the truth of these stories, so they can work on you through the coming weeks, as we begin our return to routines.

Here’s the first story: A blogger was musing recently on how the younger generations feel about church. He wrote that when he was growing up, every day he would pass by The Elks Lodge in his town. Sometimes he passed by it three or four times. But it never occurred to him to go inside. In wondering “why?” he discovered that he had a *notion* about Elks. They were all the old guys in town, who had nothing better to do of an evening than gather to drink and smoke and tell stories about hunting and fishing, and their bygone days of glory on the high school gridiron or in service to their country. His idea about what went on in there kept him from finding out what really was. To him, the Elks Lodge was **irrelevant**. Similarly, many young people today have grown up passing by churches large and small, up and down the streets they grew up on. They have grown up, gotten jobs, married, bought houses, raised children and lost parents without ever stepping foot into a church. Because just like the Elks Lodge on the corner, they have a notion of what goes on in here which keeps them from finding out what’s real. So that the church (to them) is irrelevant. And no one has shown them anything different.

Regardless of the impact of Covid on Christian living, a recent Barna Group study has found that more than half (62%) of lapsed Christians said the first quality they look for in a person with whom they might discuss faith is **‘non-judgment.’** Only a third (34%) said they know any Christians who possess this quality. Interestingly, Pew Research says that about the same number - 31% of millennials and younger have any connection at all to a faith community. Sadly, Advent reflects this data. “Our children are tired of hate, yet caught in its grip, and we will only be able to help them be free from it if the church offers a clear alternative.” So, what if Advent were to embrace **non-judgment** for all? What if Love surged to everyone? What if Hope and Dreams got fueled? What if we could disagree but not be disagreeable. What if we all focused on what drew people into our Lodge instead of spending our energy on convincing others to be what we think they should be? In a divided culture, Christians should be the help and the hope, not the hate. Then, as Elizabeth Schuyler sings in *Hamilton* “it would be enough...” and those who are passing by the church and through our lives would meet a God **in us** who erases fear through love for others. That is **relevant**.

Last week I asked you to reflect on the time in your life when you accepted as real your belief that Jesus is who he said he is. Now, we will move into a more “mystical” space of *negotiation* (for lack of a better, more spiritual word.) We have sealed **The Faith Contract** with our belief, and God is fulfilling his part of the promises Jesus has made to you. (This is what I call **The Faith Exchange**) - you give Jesus your belief in him, and God responds in ways you cannot even imagine. Let me share two more stories to flesh out that “exchange”.

Our Old Testament reading is about Elijah, the Super-Prophet and miracle worker of the Hebrew scriptures. You may remember him providing miraculous food for a widow and

her son, or his raising that very same boy from the dead. Or you may recall his famous ride into heaven on a chariot of fire. But perhaps his biggest triumph was the Miracle on Mt. Carmel - a glorious competition staged by Queen Jezebel - who asked Elijah and her prophets of Baal to prove whose god was the most powerful, by calling down fire from heaven. Our God won, which shamed Jezebel and made her angry enough to seek Elijah's life. He flees into the wilderness, and, collapsing under a solitary, desert broom tree declares, *"I might as well DIE! I'm no better than my ancestors!"* Hint. Don't try to test God.

Apparently, fear - or things not going as you had hoped - have never been easy for us to accept. Sometimes, we just want to run away. Sometimes we want to run from people; sometimes we want to run from God. Often, we want to run where there is no one and nothing, behind a closed door, to the wilderness, or even in a cave. But angels had provided food to strengthen Elijah for the 40-day journey to Horeb (Mt. Sinai) where he encountered God from the safety of his cave - not in a whirlwind, nor in a fire, but in "the still, small voice." You see, even the great prophets had their ups and downs. And today, there are those of you here who know how Elijah felt. You, too, might feel that you are sitting under a broom tree in the wilderness, saying, *"I'm done."* Even so, God provides you nourishment, and draws you to himself in silence and whispers.

I know that many of you have felt these murmurs from God. You might not know how to talk about them, but they are definitely God moments/God winks/Voices that you feel more than hear. And apparently these meetings with God happen often in Nature, and routinely under trees! Remember Jonah, who was so angry that God had forgiven the sinners in Nineveh, that **he** sat under a large bush and complained that **he** might as well die. Jonah was ready to throw in the towel. Or Nathaneal, sitting under a fig tree - perhaps in a time of despair, when Jesus saw him there. Jesus later recounted that far-off God sighting when he called Nathanael to become one of the 12.

Moments of despair. Moments of confusion. Moments when you surrender and hand it over to God. We all have them. But part of Jesus fulfilling his promise is the reality that he is present "with you always." One day on vacation, my husband Roger and I were going to hike up the Temperance River trail on Lake Superior. He wanted to get to a place where he could practice his fly-casting, and I just wanted to take a hike in the woods. At the very beginning of the trail, there was a place at the foot of a waterfall where Roger said he wanted to cast for a bit. I told him I'd go explore the big rocks not far away along the riverbank. When he came to get me to go up river, I said, "I never want to leave this spot!" because I had the clearest sense that I should stay there. I had found a little hollow in the rock for my backside, and was under the shade of a great tree (how Biblical!) He said he would be awhile, and we decided on a time for him to return. I settled in. I had water, but no phone, no book, nothing to distract me from the amazing sights and sounds of Nature. So, I just sat and thought. I hadn't had time for over a year to simply think about what the post-pandemic future might be for Advent, nor for me, but I had been feeling anxious that the visioning had become so difficult. There was so little that I could predict or depend on.

I sat there for a time, just feeling what I have described as being "in the midst of God." God wasn't something outside of me - I was inside God and God's world - a different perspective for sure. Then, I prayed for wisdom and clarity, and as the river gurgled and danced in the sunlight I felt a peace I've never felt before. And words formed inside me. "This is only the beginning. Don't be afraid." It was enough. I've heard that voice before.

Moments later Roger returned, apologetic that he was well beyond the time he said he would return. "It's okay, I haven't been here that long." "Susan, you've been sitting here for almost four hours". Time was now. Time had stopped while I listened and heard about a new dream that God is revealing, and felt the strength to continue to lead the church of today in a world of tomorrow that overwhelmingly finds the church - **irrelevant**.

As Christians, we are all Elijahs, prophets who speak God's word with power and confidence. But doing God's work--being God's voice--can be exhausting. We all know that life is full of ups and downs - even for the disciples of God. And whether we are running **to** God or running **from** God, we will all wind up in the wilderness at one time or another. But just as Elijah, Jonah, Nathaneal and each of us will find - there is nowhere to run from God's providing. There is no place where angels will not find you and feed you. There is no wilderness where God's love for you does not reach. Brothers and Sisters, we are here to do that kind of work.

Some of you know the feeling...You might be sitting out there right now, under a broom tree, thinking, "*I'm done*," just as God is preparing to feed you, calling you to "get up and eat" with your family, at this table. Reminding you, "this is only the beginning. Don't be afraid."

So, "let the voice come in, let it speak to you. I know how busy you are. I know how preoccupied you may be with a host of demands for your attention. But I encourage you to take time to let the voice come in, even for a moment. It waits patiently at the door to your perception, waiting to step over the threshold into the quiet space of your heart. Let it speak to you. It is a voice you will recognize. One you trust for you have heard it before. It has a message for you, one that only you can hear, only you can understand. The voice is the (living bread - the living) word that has no beginning, no ending. It is ever present, ever available, ever loving and merciful. Open the doors of your soul and welcome in the word of the sacred, the word that speaks life into being.

Welcome in the Bread of Life. *Taste and see that he is good; and blessed is the one who finds refuge in him.* Amen.

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**Resources:** *The Barna Group; Pew Research; Dr. Craig Barnes lectures, May 2018 Festival of Homiletics, Washington, DC; Stephen Charleston 8.4.2021 post; Carey Nieuwhof podcast; July 2021;*