

“Power Food — Part I ”

In the midst of all the discussion, debating, shouting, and finger-pointing that surrounded a decade of political attempts to address health coverage in this nation, one factor has been repeated over and over again: Americans are just too big. Diabetes is one of the most frequently diagnosed diseases. Obesity is regarded as its major cause. Limb and joint replacement surgeries keep rising, in part because those appendages were not designed to carry three and four hundred pounds.

Yet there continues this barrage of blather, mainly from television, that encourages us to gorge ourselves and glory in our over-consumption. Burger King made their Whopper Junior *“bigger, because you want it that way.”* McDonald’s, not to be outdone, featured their third-pounder Angus Beefburger — apparently the Quarter-pounder was insufficient. There is a program on the Food Network, that features this guy who goes around the country pigging out on two-foot-high stacks of pancakes, three dozen scrambled eggs, and pizzas the size of wagon wheels.

Now, it’s obvious that I like to eat, but even I say, *“Come on!”* Does anyone really need a corned beef sandwich so big that, in order to eat it, you’d have to have your mandible surgically enhanced to act like that of a python. Can one really, in good conscience, scarf down a breakfast sandwich that contains over 1,200 calories? Maybe — maybe! — if you worked as a ditch digger or hod carrier, or such a job that burned off tons of calories each hour, you could justify such intake . . . but most of us do not expend that kind of energy.

The topic of food has been on our lectionary radar for the past two weeks, and continues today and next week. It began with John’s narrative about the miraculous feeding of five thousand with two fish and five loaves of barley bread. But, where Matthew Mark, and Luke were content simply to record that miracle, John wants us to reflect on it. So John’s narrative continues, first into the realm of what Jesus was not doing in setting out that meal — He was not establishing a political order.

Today we examine yet another facet of the meaning of the miracle feeding. To get at that, we should take a look at the truly wonderful story that is today's First Lesson.

The prophet Elijah was on the run. Having challenged the priests of Baal to demonstrate the impotence of their god against the power of Yahweh, Elijah saw Yahweh reveal power even he could not have imagined. In the end, Elijah stirred up the crowd that was watching, and they grabbed all the priests of Baal and killed them. In making such a public disgrace of the Baal cult, Elijah engendered the wrath of Queen Jezebel, a woman from Sidon and a Baal worshiper. She was so angry at Elijah that she wanted him dead — hence he is on the run. So quickly did he have to flee that there was no time to gather provisions for a life on the run.

In the lesson read today we come upon Elijah under a broom tree in total depression, wanting to die He falls asleep. An angel comes to him, taps him on the shoulder, and tells him to eat of the hot meal that has miraculously appeared (you begin to see the link to the miracle feeding of five thousand). Elijah got up and ate, and then the Book of Kings relates something that I regard as quite fantastic: ***“then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”***

Rock-baked cake and water would not be my menu choice under just about any circumstances, but most certainly not if I am about to embark on a walking trip. You see advertisements for “5-Hour Energy Drinks” and “power bars” that are supposed to enliven your day — and Red Bull supposedly *“gives you wings.”* They got nothing on this simple meal: ***“he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights . . .”*** Does it say he walked continuously for all that time? The Hebrew does indicate that. Man, I can't imagine walking forty hours (I might just barely manage forty minutes if rest stops were included). This is the deeper tie to what Jesus wants to teach us about the Bread of Life.

The first verse of today's Gospel reading (as I indicated last Sunday) would be better translated, *“The one coming to me does not hunger, the*

one believing in me does not thirst.” The Greek has a tense that English has only in a roundabout way — it’s called the aorist. When a Greek verb is in this tense, it signals an ongoing action. “*He runs,*” in the aorist would mean “*He keeps on running.*” Jesus invites us, not to taste Him, nor to sample Him, nor to snack on Him — He invites us to feast on Him continuously. Why? Because He is “*the bread that came down from heaven.*” Much like that meal set before Elijah in the wilderness, Jesus comes to us miraculously, and powerfully. Elijah ate and walked for forty days and nights. We eat and . . . well, let’s see.

That term of forty time periods appears often in the Biblical narratives. It rained forty days and nights at the Great Flood. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. Moses spent forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai. There are four times in the Book of Judges that Israel is said to have peace for forty years. Goliath taunted the Israelites for forty straight days. David ruled as king for forty years, as did Solomon. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before being tempted. Jesus stayed with the Twelve for forty days after His resurrection. There are more, but you get the idea.

Forty is not a “magical” number, but it does seem to hold some significance for the Biblical authors. Is it a mere symbol that these writers stuck into the text to signal us to pay closer attention? Or is it God doing something in such a way that consistently His purposes take up forty days, hours, years? I suspect it is the latter, and if I ever need to write another doctoral thesis, I would focus on this.

Suffice it to say here that these time periods of forty are kairological. Again, Greek makes a distinction lacking in English — a distinction between chronological time (that which is measured by a clock or watch ... it is now _____ by my watch, chronological time) and kairological time (that which gives time meaning or purpose, for example: “*Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party,*” which Helen Keller parodied by saying, “*Now is the time for all good men to come to.*”) Forty seems to denote kairological time — time pregnant with meaning and purpose.

Clearly there was purpose that drove Elijah into the wilderness and to Horeb, the mount of God. Elijah could not know that purpose, indeed he was shocked when it was made known to him. There on that mountain, as Elijah stood before God, a great wind, then an earthquake, then a raging fire blew across the mountain, and we are told repeatedly by the narrator: ***“the LORD was not in”*** any of those manifestations of power. Then came a still, small voice (or as Walter Wangerin paraphrases it, *“the very sound of stillness”*) — the voice of the almighty cloaked in weakness — asking Elijah what he was doing on that mountain.

As he had said in today’s reading, Elijah repeats that he wants to die because it appears that everyone and everything is against him. I’ll bet you’ve had days like that — days when all your best efforts seemed to go for nothing, when no one offered a single word of appreciation, but nitpicking criticism came flowing in abundance? *“Nonsense,”* God tells him. *“There are seven thousand warriors waiting for you right now, ready to do God’s work.”*

Now what has that to do with the Feeding of Five Thousand? Very little with the actual miracle ... but it has a lot to do with the Bread of Life narrative Jesus is relating through John. When Jesus says, ***“I am the bread that came down from heaven,”*** the Jews listening to Him take offense because they relate this to the manna event in the wilderness. Jesus puts that thought aside, ***“Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.”*** Heavenly food though it was, it was not eternal food; both the manna and those who ate it disappeared. ***“This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.”*** What is this bread? Jesus says, ***“I am.”***

This is more like the cake that Elijah ate in the wilderness, power food that fortified him to go where God wanted him to go and experience what God had in store for him. There is this difference: Elijah ate and drank just the once and was empowered to keep going for forty days and nights. Jesus bids us to keep on eating and drinking and be empowered forever.

In today's Second Lesson, St. Paul gives the Ephesians a whole catalogue of things they ought to be doing. Paul does this in most of his letters. After spelling out the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ, grace that is really grace — free, extravagant, unending — Paul enters into the ramifications of this grace for daily living. Usually, this section is set off by the Greek word, οὖν, (oun) “therefore” (in today's reading that comes toward the end): ***“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”***

How do you imitate God? You live in love as Christ loved us. Why do that? Surely not to merit God's love — you already have that. No, it is to reflect God's love. How did Christ love? He gave Himself up for us. How did Elijah get the courage to go back and face Jezebel? He was loved by God, loved into community, and made ready to give himself up. What does Paul encourage us to do? Imitate God and Christ in giving ourselves up in love.

How do we do that? We don't have that kind of strength. We don't possess that kind of courage! We don't own those kind of resources. Here's how we start:

Sit there quietly and wait for the voice of God — we may have experienced thunder and lightning, we've even had the occasional earthquake in Northeast Ohio — but now we want to be attentive to the still, small voice of God, the very whisper of silence.

We want to be ready for the question: *“What are you doing here?”* We want to be ready to pour out before God all the days and times when we have felt broken, isolated, betrayed, disappointed, lost, angry, grief-stricken, physically deprived, emotionally drained, spiritually bereft.

Then we need to listen to what God is telling us He is doing in the midst of that mess — where He has provided support, community, hope that we did not know existed except that we now listen for Him, His voice, His

words, His message.

And then we will eat. ***“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*** The angel told Elijah: ***“Get up and eat . . . Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”*** So is life’s journey — too much sometimes — which is why we need this power food. Elijah ***“got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”***

Blessings as you eat this power-filled Bread of Life . . . blessings on your journey to that place where God will meet you.

Amen.