

NRS **1 Kings 19:4** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." <sup>8</sup> He 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.

NRS **John 6:35** Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ~~<sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.~~ ~~<sup>37</sup> Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.~~" <sup>3</sup>

~~<sup>41</sup> Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."~~ <sup>42</sup> They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup> No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup> Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> 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."

This past week, I made a quick trip back to the Midwest for two reasons, one of which was a delayed trip to see my best friend of sixty-plus years, Emerson Lacey, who since I had last seen him had undergone a serious and not really – or yet, as I continue to hope -- successful back operation; Emerson and Martha live in a western suburb of Chicago. The other was, well, Nancy's playing "Simple Gifts" as our prelude last week was her honoring for me that Thursday was the twenty-fifth anniversary, if *anniversary* is the right term, of the death of my first wife, Carol, which happened in Valparaiso, northwest Indiana, which the Vucson's know well. With Patricia's blessing — man have I ever been twice-blessed by God, — I visited our old church and drove past the homes in which Carol and I lived, including the one in which she died. We had the latter built in 1990 and in the past twenty-five years, it has been dramatically altered.

One certainly cannot "go home again"; much has changed, though this was not a bathos or gut-wrenching experience, nor really that nostalgic.

But the point is that to do this, I of course had to fly, and this summer the planes are full and the airports are busy — and rental cars expensive. People are traveling and

booking well in advance; I have platinum status with American Airlines, yet because I waited to book, I had middle seats both ways between Phoenix and Chicago.

I have been flying for many years; I am one of those with more than a million miles based on my previous career, and I can remember when airlines provided meals on flights longer than about an hour. Now, it is a can of water or soft-drink and, if lucky, two of those very good but small, gingery “Biscoff” cookies.

Not a meal of sustenance for a journey, certainly less than that cake and water that God provided Elijah because, “otherwise the journey would be too much” for him.

Elijah is one of my favorite Old Testament characters, and while we have read in previous weeks two stories about King David and Nathan, the first prophet referred to by that term in the Bible, though I suppose we should consider Samuel to have been a prophet, Elijah is sort of the first *real prophet* we encounter as we have extended stories about him, and though we have not one written word and little in the stories that can be interpreted as “speaking for God,” the way we would define what a *prophet* does, his importance as that *first prophet* is such that it is to Elijah that John the Baptizer is compared, and it is Elijah who appears with Moses in the story of the *Transfiguration* of Jesus. From a Christian, if not, since I am not knowledgeable, a Jewish perspective, Moses represents the *Law* and Elijah represents the *Prophets* – at least in the scheme of the Gospel According to Matthew.

Our brief story of Elijah and the cake and water is not the first time we have God providing food for a journey; the Exodus involves God providing both quails and *manna*, this stuff that appeared on plants in the mornings of the Exodus we refer to as “Bread” and to which Jesus indeed is referring when He refers in our Gospel reading to day as the *Bread* which has “come down from Heaven.”

And this metaphor of Jesus gets to a topic we have been discussing the previous two weeks: Jesus’ filling — or perhaps, *satisfying* would be a better word, — *our hunger*; Jesus provides spiritual food for the journey of life, just as God provided that physical cake and water, food, for Elijah’s journey, also pretty much comparable in meaning to

Jesus's coming to their boat in the storm to get His disciples to "the place they were making for."

"But John, however poetic that may seem, it is really vague and general even if we get the point in concept; does it have any actual practical use?"

There are two matters that while not necessarily Bible-related that I feel comfortable discussing in sermons based on my own life -- politics is not one of them: — physics and *grief*.

While in some way grief or its aftermath was one of the factors that led me to those plane rides this week, my trip simply was not an indulgence in grief, yet a conversation with Emerson about another friend of ours from college with whom he is much closer than I -- I have only seen him about three times in the past sixty years -- a conversation dealt with the topic *if only because* I introduced the term into it. The specific is a sensitive topic that affects several of you here such that I hope you are not uncomfortable from its personal relevance to you, because I suspect it might in the future become of relevance to others, as well.

This friend has had to put his wife of over forty years into a memory care unit, and his family is concerned because of how emotionally – and Emerson says the friend has always been outwardly emotional – concerned because of how emotionally he has been reacting to the experience.

My first comment was that I am not sure to what extent any of us can really control our emotional reactions, though perhaps if we recognize them as such maybe we can, but I asked if he was getting and suggested his getting *grief counseling*.

For *grief* is what he is experiencing. As a former member of this congregation who had a somewhat similar experience told me when I flew to do the funeral for his late wife, "It was like I lost her twice," the first time's being when the dementia or Alzheimer's had taken hold of her.

So our friend is experiencing *grief*; it is grief over the loss of something he had but feels he has no longer.

And that *grief* is to be expected. Martha Nussbaum, whom I have not met but though not a lawyer actually teaches something, I am not sure what, at my old law school, has written that *grief is a rational emotion*.

*Rational emotion?* That sounds like an oxymoron, yet it is not; as I said, for grief is the awareness that something of value that one had one has no longer; grief is an acknowledgment to one's self of a real loss.

But wanting to provide at least something Emerson might offer as he said others had apparently recommended grief counseling to our friend to no avail, I said what I always say for one grieving the loss of a loved one, "Reflect and *be thankful for what you had and enjoyed*." I can say that because not only do I believe it, I have done it; no, I do it. It does not mean there is no hurt, but, well, I am stuck for words but it does seem to remove as an obstacle to one's moving onward or at least it attenuates the hurt and leads to some joy because one can feel — here's that word I cannot overuse — one can feel *gratitude*.

*Gratitude*; if one had not had that for which one is thankful, there would be no grief, but would one honestly swap the grief if it meant not having experienced the joy, the loss of which is the reason for the grief?

Which led me to ask myself in the light of our readings, is feeling *gratitude* itself "food God provides for the journey"? Perhaps not for your journey, but for a journey some of us have travelled, some are traveling, and you might travel in the future?

We could get into some fairly deep theological question here about whether we choose faith or faith chooses us, a question one can draw from our reading from the Gospel of John this morning. But put that aside, and for those of you who are dealing, will be dealing or might be dealing with loss, which I think we all might be, try grasping the feeling of gratitude; be thankful. Think about the past if you need to in order to come up with pleasant memories, and if you can feel gratitude for them, jealously hang onto that gratitude and exercise it – and apparently Emerson's and my friend is not religious, which misses this aspect of the feeling – exercise that gratitude by expressing it not only to your self, but to God, every day of your lives.

I believe there is nothing that can help the journey to where we are going so much as constantly saying within one's self, "Thank you, God!"

I have long thought of and expressed to you that *gratitude* is one of the two most important aspects of the Christian life — the other, as you know, is *humility*, but I haven't mastered that one — and I can say that *gratitude* has been better than any cookie or cake for my journey. Whether we will it or are given it, I encourage you to grasp at whatever you know or knew that brings or in the past brought you joy and daily to give thanks for that, even if it is no longer there for you.

*Gratitude* will help you journey on without that or whom you are missing; *gratitude* is food for the journey — and I believe it does come down as a gift from Heaven.

In the name of *the bread of heaven*, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*