Scripture for Life



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Most of us have heard the warning, "Be careful what you pray for." As one of my friends lamented, "I prayed for patience, and suddenly my life was chock-full of opportunities to practice it!" Today's snippet from Elijah's story illustrates how God will take us at our word and go one further. God has a reputation for answering our prayer in ways we wouldn't anticipate.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 8, 2021

1 Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

John 6:41-51

We meet Elijah at the end of his rope. He had done what God ordered and his prophetic labors made Queen Jezebel hate him more than ever. Rather than fall into her hands, he fled to the desert where he planned to die a peaceful death. Little did he realize that when he prayed, "Take my life," God would do just that — not by killing him, but by nourishing and rehabilitating him. God took his life and transformed it through angelic ministrations. It's hard to imagine how perturbed Elijah felt when, instead of being allowed to die in his sleep, that angel woke him up, fed him, and sent him into a new chapter of his life. Be careful what you pray for!

In today's Gospel, John gives us a classic example of people's misperception of Jesus and his message. When Jesus said, "I am the bread come down from heaven," he was calling on his people's religious memory, proclaiming that he was God's sign of love and providence for them. Interestingly, they understood him well enough that they didn't label him a crazy person claiming to be bread, but they lost it over the idea that he claimed to be sent by God. They were unshakably convinced that nobody they knew, nobody with origins as humble as his, could have been sent to them by God.

Of course, their position implied a triple denial. First, they refused to believe that the too-well-known Jesus from Nazareth could be God's messenger. At the same time, that very refusal subtly yet categorically denied that God would bother with them or have the audacity to reveal something new. (It's fairly easy to believe in revelations from the past. But the idea that God could speak in our day, that's another story; the safest bet is to decide that it's nothing more than a story.)

Here's where Paul's message reinforces Jesus' ideas. As Paul addresses his people he warns: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit!" Jesus responded to doubters by reminding them that perceiving God in action among them demands openness and discernment. Jesus faced them with a choice we all must make: They could hold to their own theological positions or they could allow themselves to be drawn by God into more than they could imagine. In Paul's language, they had to choose whether or not to live as God's beloved children, inspired and inspiring.

Regrettably, the people Jesus addressed in Capernaum that day were choosing to content themselves with murmuring — complaining and avoiding any responsibility. Rejecting Jesus' invitation to something new, they defended themselves against his message by attacking his background and sowing doubt. They were ready to do anything necessary to write him off rather than accept the frightening challenge of believing that the God who sustained their ancestors was reaching out to them. We can almost imagine Paul pleading with them and saying, "You are choosing bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling when you could be imitators of God in kindness and love!"

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John didn't write history, he wrote a Gospel designed to evangelize, a call to conversion for his community and for those to come. He wanted us to find ourselves in the story and to respond accordingly. The Letter to the Ephesians, whether from the hand of Paul or one of his disciples, was written to the church, not to one single community. Without knowing us, John and Paul were writing for us.

To what are they inviting us? First of all, they are daring us to recognize how well our complaining and critiques can serve as defenses against God's invitations. Second, and more importantly, John and Paul remind us that the God of Israel, the God of Jesus never stops calling and revealing self to us. The God who sustained the people

in the desert spoke through Jesus and still longs to draw us close. Jesus invites us to be so nourished by his life and message that we do what Paul said, we become imitators of Christ who gave himself to God by giving himself to others, by being flesh for the life of the world.

Today's Scripture stories clearly admit that murmuring is much easier than praying and believing. They also dare us to risk an encounter with the living God who answers prayer in ever-new, life-giving, mind- and soul-transforming ways.

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