

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 9, 2009  
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you want good roads, you have to pay taxes to fix them. If you're not willing to pay taxes to keep them, then you have to accept toll roads. If you want to have government run things, and how much government should run is certainly the question of our day, then you have to find a way to pay the people and agencies that run them. Should government be in the auto business? Should government be in the health care business? Should government or the free market be the regulating force in an open economy? These are questions whose answers are yet to be determined and much lively debate awaits us in the months and years ahead.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your outlook, the role of government in the days of Elijah was not questioned as ours is today in the modern republic. In Elijah's day, the reigning monarch said, "jump" and the citizenry said, "How high?" When King David ruled the United Monarchy of Israel, he had his own standing army, who were loyal only to him, and so, unless and until another man with a greater army confronted and challenged him, his word was law. In his lifetime, no one did.

So great and well loved, or feared, was David, that when it came time to find his successor, the only clear choice was Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba. Well, to be truthful, the choice wasn't nearly as clear until Solomon had David's other son, Adonijah killed, along with all of his supporters. After that happened, it became QUITE clear, who was to succeed the great, and feared, King David.

Solomon, therefore, was not only wise, but shrewd and ruthless as well. But that's fodder for another sermon. Suffice it to say, Solomon's accord didn't fall far from his father's tree.

Legend records Solomon's great wisdom, but history records his penchant for nation building, extensive trade treaties, building, and women. During his long reign of 40 years, he expanded the size of his kingdom at least fourfold, established significant trade agreements with Africa, Asia, Arabia and Asia Minor. He amassed a large naval and trading fleet, and collected over seven hundred wives, many as a result of the aforementioned trade agreements.

His affection for and ability to oversee large construction projects, not the least of which included the elaborate palaces and the Great Temple, were also legendary as well as historical.

All this came at a price however, as he crafted a more cosmopolitan Israel, outside influences, traditions and religious beliefs infiltrated the strict monotheism of the Israelite community. But perhaps even more divisive than these, was the tax structure he imposed on his kingdom to support his lavish lifestyle, his significant army and his elaborate and extensive building projects. Chief among his kingdom's complaints was the temple tax he levied on all of Israel, north and south, to fund the Great Temple in Jerusalem. The seeds for dissension were sown.

At his death, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was unable to retain the support of the northern kingdom of Israel and so the kingdom split. Rehoboam retained the kingship of the southern kingdom, named Judah, with Jeroboam becoming the kingdom of the northern kingdom of Israel. History recalls this period as the Divided Monarchy. During this time, until the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, the northern kingdom had 18 ruling kings and the southern, 12. The next 60 years, saw relative stability in the southern kingdom, with only 3 kings ruling from 933 until 870, but

the northern kingdom saw 6 different kings in 45 years. Imagine what terrible things could happen if every 4 – 8 years you needed to elect new leadership?

Anyway...by the time we get to 885, the northern kingdom of Israel had seen much turmoil and much intrigue. Finally, under the reign of King Omri, Israel found some stability and prosperity, so much so, that Assyrian historical annals record Omri as a force to be reckoned with and a great king. Many compared him to King David.

When Omri died in 874, he was succeeded by his son, Ahab, who, by all historical accounts, was a good and powerful king, following in his father's footsteps. He was the first of the Israelite kings to bump heads with the growing Assyrian empire, modern day Iraq. But we know most of what we know about Ahab, comes from his encounters with the prophet Elijah. Elijah had a problem with Ahab that centered around his wife. Ahab married the daughter of the king of Sidon, whose name was Jezebel. Now we all know that when you marry, there's an adjustment period you go through. Among the many decisions that have to be made include, who sleeps on what side of the bed, does the toilet paper come over the top or does it feed from the bottom, do we need two different kinds of toothpaste and shampoo, who controls the remote, if we're both busy and the phone rings, who gets up to answer it? Important things like that. And if husband and wife come from a different religious tradition, how do we handle that, does one change, or do we go to one church one week and another the next, or as is the case in some homes, we don't go at all. Well, Ahab was a faithful Jew, Jezebel was not. She was a follower of the cult religion of the Canaanite god, Baal. Now Baal, was the god of weather, a nature god, he brought the rain, thunder and lightning were his weapons and some historians connected him with Zeus. Because he controlled the weather, he also controlled agriculture. He was responsible for the fertility of the soil and so it wasn't a far stretch to add fertility of all things as part of his portfolio. And so fertility rituals including erotic imagery and sexual encounters evolved within the cult, and which presented serious ethical and moral consequences for the more traditional Israelites.

The veneration of Baal in ancient Israel and Palestine was pervasive and the Jewish priests and prophets all condemned the worship of Baal. So, Ahab had a problem, his wife, was a Baalite, as were many of the non Jewish population at the time. Ahab, though a great military strategist, was not successful in converting his wife and so, the worship of Baal was allowed in the royal courts and, eventually, spread to the populace as well. Jezebel wanted Baal worshipped and not the Israelite God, Yahweh.

Enter the prophet Elijah.

Today's reading from the book of Kings, picks up the story of Elijah after his first major encounter with King Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. As a way of drawing attention to the consequences of abandoning Yahweh for Baal, Elijah predicts a great drought and summons the prophets of Baal and their chief adherent, Jezebel, to a kind of prophets' duel. Whose god could bring about a change in nature? In a marvelous narrative, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to bring fire down upon the sacrifice they had set up as a test. After a day of praying and wailing crying and pleading, after rituals of self mutilation and more, the prophets of Baal were unable to bring fire down from heaven. Elijah, then, with great showmanship, drenching the altar, sacrifice and surrounding area with buckets and buckets of water, calls upon Yahweh to bring fire from heaven to light the sacrificial pyre. Yahweh does, and Elijah convinces the crowd that Yahweh is the God to be feared and followed and orders the demise of all the prophets of Baal. Well, as you can imagine, Jezebel is angry and vows to avenge these deaths with the death of Elijah.

This is where we pick up this morning's narrative from the book of Kings. Elijah is afraid for his life, and wanders a day's journey into the wilderness and lies down under a solitary broom tree and asks God that he might be allowed to die. "It is enough," Elijah cries, take away my life, Lord, for I am no better than my ancestors." And while wallowing in the midst of his own self pity and doubt, scripture tells us than an angel, *angelos* in Greek, literally a messenger comes to him and tells him to get up, eat and drink the provisions God had prepared for him. So he does, but then, after having eaten, lies down again to lament that his faithfulness did not bring him the fame, or luck, or good fortune, or blessing, or good health, or nicer chariot, or affectionate spouse, or house in the suburbs with a nice lawn that he had hoped would be his reward for his faithfulness. Faithfulness is its own reward, in other words, the reward for faithfulness is faithfulness.

The messenger appears again, touches him, which was probably more like a shove, and repeats, "Get up, eat and drink, for the journey ahead demands it." Perhaps it was the food, or the shove or the repeating of the message that got Elijah to break out of his reverie of despair, but he does rise and goes to Mt. Horeb, and there receives his charge to anoint Jehu, Hazeal and Elisha to carry on the fight against the Baalite apostasy.

The reward of faithfulness is the promise that one can remain faithful in the future, which is contrary to way so many other things work in our day to day lives. We live a Pavlovian existence of action and reward. From the M and M's at potty training to the promotion at work, from the smile our first words elicited from Mom or Dad to the baubles we receive as mementos of our success, whether it be the Lincoln or the Lexus, the grand foyer or the beach house, we've been paper trained by reward since an early age, which is why trying to see an action as its own reward is such a foreign thing to most of us.

God, through God's messenger to Elijah said as much. Faithfulness is its own reward, so get back to the business of being faithful and stop looking for the treat.

In much the same way, this is what Jesus was talking about when he referred to himself as the bread of life. When he did that, everyone began to think immediately of the bread you eat and when he said the one who eats of THIS bread will never be hungry, everyone looked at him bewildered because this flies in the face of everything we know. We eat only to eat again, the satisfaction of eating, of chewing and tasting, of feeling full comes as a reward for the bread we eat. But Jesus said you misunderstand, the bread of life, which IS Jesus, is not to be consumed as the bread your ancestors ate, and they died, this bread is to be appropriated by faith, to be ingested in the heart and mind, as a gift from God because of God's love for us, and not as a reward for our asking. Acknowledging Jesus as the bread of life, real life, true life, eternal life, is the goal of faith, and it is its own reward.

Amen.