

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8
Message: What Does Hope Taste Like?
December 3, 2017; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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Advent 1

What is your favourite Christmas food? What is something that you enjoy at Christmas, or in the Christmas season, that you do not enjoy any other time of the year?

When you enjoy this food, do you sample, taking just a small bit, to savour it?

Or when you enjoy this food, do you indulge, taking in as much as you can. After all, it's only at Christmas that you enjoy it, so enjoy it to the fullest!

When you enjoy this food, is it nourishing, satisfying? Or is it enjoyed for the taste and for the treat, not so much for the healthy nourishment it provides?

When you enjoy this food, is it about the experience of having it? Or is it just to grab some and then reach for more?

Does your favourite food at Christmas speak to you of memories of the past, when this food was part of a particular celebration? Or perhaps this food reminds you of a special person, or a special time in your life. Whenever you smell this food being prepared, or take a nibble or a bite, or savour another piece, your mind goes back to that time when....

What does hope taste like? That's an odd question. We don't often think about the idea of hope in connection with food. Food is just there. It's something we enjoy. Or it's just something we need to have. But I bring up the idea of memories and special foods to bring to mind the idea of hope. These particular foods at Christmas bring to mind the hope of good times, the anticipation of getting together with friends or family. Or maybe the particular foods bring to mind sadness, or the hope for better times. Sometimes when we are discouraged or sad, a particular food can give us hope or encouragement. We might even use the label of "comfort food."

In our story from 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah feeling very much without hope. It's hard to understand, since he has just won an amazing battle on Mt. Carmel. (If you wish, you can read the whole story in 1 Kings 18)

Queen Jezebel is not impressed and she threatens Elijah in no uncertain terms. She sends a messenger and swears an oath by her own gods that Elijah's days are numbered. "Within 24 hours, Elijah, you're a goner. I'll treat you like you treated my prophets. If I don't come through on my promise, I'll have to answer to my own gods. So, Elijah, watch out!!"

The threat worked. Elijah ran for his life. He went as far south as he could go, and then travels another day deeper into the desert.

Although Elijah ran away so that Jezebel would not kill him, he now asks *God* to take his life. "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

What happened to Elijah? What happened to this man of God who boldly spoke God's judgment to Ahab's face? What happened to this man of faith who stood alone on Mt. Carmel against 450 prophets and saw his prayer answered with fire from heaven? He had experienced the grace of God in being fed by ravens and by a poor widow. He had witnessed the power of God in the raising of a dead child to life and in the burning of a water-soaked sacrifice and altar. How could he have lost all hope and give up?

We must be careful not to be too hard on Elijah. Remember, as the apostle James says in his New Testament book, Elijah was a man just like us. He was no super-hero. He was a regular guy, doing God's work.

Elijah was caught up in the thick of the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. He got so involved that he began to identify *himself* with what he was doing. Therefore, the failure of the Mt. Carmel miracle to cause a lasting, meaningful conversion in Israel was seen as a personal failure by Elijah. He lost all hope.

In his despair Elijah was letting go of the work of the Lord. That work could only be viewed through the eyes of faith. It took faith to believe, to have hope, that God was at work. It took faith for Elijah to see that he was a part of God's Grand Story. The prophet was looking at his own work, at one event and not the big picture. He was looking at his own struggle and he reduced the work of the Lord to those dimensions. What God was able to do was defined by what Elijah was able to do. God's power was limited to Elijah's power. Losing the perspective of faith led him to this great confusion and loss of hope. Now that he believed that he had failed in his own work, he assumed that the Lord's work had failed as well.

With this conclusion Elijah saw no need to continue. "My work is finished. It's hopeless. Take my life."

But God had other ideas. Hope was not lost. By his grace God turned that dry desert location under the broom tree into a place for nourishment, a place of hope. He graciously allowed Elijah to sleep, to get some rest. Then God sent his angel to wake him up to eat and drink. He is fed by a miracle, as he was earlier in his ministry. Elijah consented and again went back to sleep. A second time he was told to wake up and eat and drink. This time the angel added that he would be going on a journey.

God did not punish Elijah for becoming discouraged and giving up hope and going where God had not sent him. Rather God met him there, fed him and strengthened him so that

he would have hope and continue.

Elijah was a prophet of God preparing the way for the coming of the one who would win that final victory. The victory to which Elijah looked forward in faith is the victory of Jesus Christ in the battle against Satan and evil. By his death Jesus paid the debt of our sin. But the death of Jesus was not the end. On Golgotha it looked like Satan defeated God's plan. Perhaps it looked like he won the battle, but he did not win the war. Even that death itself was a victory, with Jesus paying for sin.

The battle was not only fought on Golgotha. We also remember that Jesus rose again from the dead. In his resurrection Jesus defeated Satan. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). We are accepted by God. Death has been overcome. We have eternal life, life with God now and forever.

But although the victory has been won, it does not mean that the war is over. Satan still wants to ruin as many lives as he can. He still acts as if he has all sorts of power. He still tries to fool people into thinking that *he* is the one to follow, because *he* will lead his followers to victory.

We see that battle going on all around us. At times things go great. Family gets along. Church involvement is exciting. Personal devotions are regular and meaningful. Friends are supportive. All is good.

But then there's that fight in the family or church, or a sudden illness of a dear friend. Or there's the opposition to the testimony of Christians that makes the headlines. Or maybe it's the reports of corruption in government or the extremist activity that causes so much death.

Perhaps it's repeated frustration when something just won't succeed. Maybe it's mere exhaustion— we run so hard in so many areas that we get plain tired. Or perhaps we are discouraged because we never seem to get on a crest of a spiritual high like others around us. And so we mull around in our discouragement. We look at the world and the church and ourselves and our failures or weakness. We lose hope.

God calls us to keep our eyes of faith wide open. God does not want us to think that *his* work of grace ends when *we* have reached the end of our strength. He does not want us to think that *his* work will go under if *we* perish in the battle. If *we* fail before the forces opposed to Christ, this does not mean that the Lord's cause is lost.

Maybe you are feeling that discouragement today. Maybe you feel that like you are in a

place that is like a desert, dry and lifeless. Maybe you are struggling to find hope or you are frustrated by tensions or arguments. You don't see the possibilities of joy or promise or hope for the future. You might be looking up against Christmas.

Some of you have little or no hope for *yourselves*. Too often you have disappointed God and disobeyed him. Or you can't seem to get excited about your faith anymore. God doesn't seem to mean much or make much difference.

Maybe you are tired: tired of serving, tired of asking people to help, tired of trying to get people excited, tired of looking for change.

In his grace God comes to us and says, "Go ahead and rest for a while. But don't think you're going to quit on me. I'm not done with you yet." God feeds us, with his word and with his sacrament. "Don't sit there moping, focusing on defeat. Look to Jesus Christ. He won the victory. He won *your* victory. Get up and work toward the realization of that ultimate victory."

God says, "I've got work for you to do, as an individual and as a congregation. And you receive your strength for that work through Jesus Christ. Eat his body; drink his blood. Remember and believe. Nourish your faith. Remember the water of baptism poured out and remember your cleansing from sin by his blood. Be filled with Christ. Be filled with the Spirit and all his power."

In this Advent season, we celebrate the hope that is ours in the coming of Jesus and in his coming again. This morning we taste that hope in a small piece of cracker and a tiny cup of juice. It doesn't seem like much. But it is nourishment for the journey, because it is the Lord himself feeding us with the presence of Jesus in our lives. It is a taste of the hope we have of knowing that we are loved as God's own children. It is a taste of the hope we have of the glorious feast in heaven, when all God's people celebrate the eternal victory.

We will have our joys and struggles in this life. But do not lose hope. Remember the Grand Story. Look to Jesus.

Just after that verse in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul says God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ," we read: "Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Lift up your hearts. Taste the hope that is ours in our victorious Lord Jesus. Live and serve in the power of the victory which he has won for us.

Amen.