

Soul food (1 Kings 19:4-8; John 6:35, 41-51)

In the face of existential threat, God comes with the grace which is the courage to be.

by [H. Stephen Shoemaker](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

Ego eimi, Jesus begins. I AM. Then he finishes the audacious sentence: I AM the bread of life. I AM, he goes on, the bread from heaven here to do the will of the One who sent me: to help people believe and by believing have eternal life.

The people get hung up on Jesus's origins. He's Joe's boy from Nazareth. But Jesus is talking mission, not genotype. Then Jesus's language turns even stranger: Anyone who eats of this bread will live eternally, and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

The word "flesh" may be closer to Jesus's original eucharistic words than "body"—more Hebraic, less Greek, a more vivid metaphor, harder to swallow. "This is my flesh given for you."

Pause a moment and go to 1 Kings. The mighty Elijah is fresh from his spectacular victory at Mount Carmel where he triumphed over the priests of Baal, then promptly slaughtered them all (450, but who's counting?). Queen Jezebel has heard and vowed to have his head within 24 hours. Elijah flees to the wilderness where he falls into despair and says to God, "It is enough. Take away my life."

Paul Tillich wrote of the "courage to be" in face of three great onslaughts to our psyche: the anxiety of death, the anxiety of guilt, the anxiety of meaninglessness. Any of the three can destroy our will to go on. No doubt Elijah is facing the psychic threat of his imminent death. Jezebel usually gets what she wants. He may or may not be filled with guilt over his slaughter of the priests, but why would we assume not? Our nation's soldiers come back from every war deeply wounded with the guilt of killing, even when they believe in the justness of the cause and believe they have done the best they knew to do under hellish circumstances. Elijah is certainly confronted with the retribution of Jezebel, the judgment Jesus spoke of when he said,

“Those who live by the sword die by it.” And Elijah is clearly overwhelmed by meaninglessness. What good is following Yahweh if Ahab and Jezebel will have their day?

In face of these threats to our being when we do not know how we will go on—or even care—God comes with the grace which is the courage to be. In our text God sends an angel to feed Elijah and give him strength for the journey ahead. Sometimes the simple gift of feeding and eating is what we most need next to carry on—no little grace.

In John 6 Jesus promises to give the bread which is life itself: “This bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Raymond Brown says the word “flesh” or *sarx* may be closer to the Aramaic word Jesus may have used than the Synoptics’ more familiar “body.” There is, he said, no Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent for “body” as we understand the word.

Talk of flesh and eating arouses in us, as well as in that original audience, a stronger and more confounding response. Centuries of debate between Christians about the meaning of the Eucharist do not ease the offense of these words. Gail O’Day sends us back to the prologue of John, “And the word became flesh, *sarx*, and dwelt among us,” and to John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.”

Here was his life being given for the life of the world. Jesus seems to be prefiguring his death with phrases about his “hour” which was to come, and the temple of his body to be destroyed, about the kind of love that leads one to give one’s life for a friend and a shepherd to give his life for the sheep.

Did he not only foresee his death but also see it connected to God’s redemption of the world? It could be argued that all such ideas were placed in his mouth by those who came later, but there was plenty in Jesus’s Hebraic tradition to give him an understanding of himself as a suffering messiah whose death would bring the healing of the world: Isaiah’s suffering servant, Maccabean martyr theology, Moses’s offer to give his life if God would spare his people.

My flesh, Jesus said, is the bread of life given for the world, bread willing to be broken. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.”

We are justly cautious about reiterating atonement theories. They are metaphors with little resonant field of meaning in our experience: ransom, substitution, satisfaction, *Christus victor*, etc. Our theories can only point. As George Buttrick said, "Can we explain the cross? So far: then faith leaps the rest of the distance, and words are lost in adoration."

But the folly and scandal of the cross still has its power to change our lives. You may have read these words reportedly scrawled on the wall of a German concentration camp:

O Lord, when I shall come with glory in your kingdom, do not remember only the men of good will; remember also the men of evil. May they be remembered not only for their acts of cruelty in this camp . . . but balance against their cruelty the fruits we have reaped under the stress and in the pain; the comradeship, the courage, the greatness of heart, the humility and patience which have . . . become part of our lives because we have suffered at their hands. May the memory of us not be a nightmare to them when they stand in judgment. May all that we have suffered be acceptable to you as a ransom for them.

And then the prayer concluded: "unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die . . ."

Whoever wrote those words had partaken of Jesus, the bread of life. And had been given, in face of the worst, the courage to be—the courage to die, and the courage to go on living.