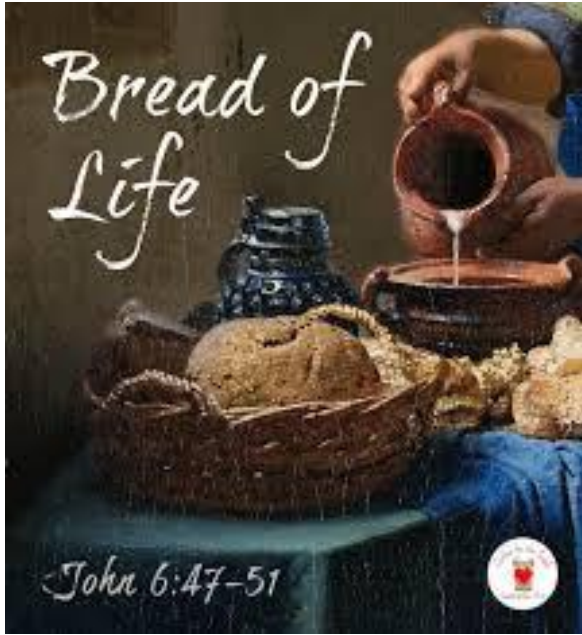


Homily – August 11th, 2024 – 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Twenty one years ago, while driving back from a retreat in Arizona, I visited Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah. It was November, and the tourists were



pretty much gone for the season except for a few stragglers like myself. I remember getting very close to the mule deer, within a few meters, and they weren't afraid at all. I suspected that they had gotten acclimated to the huge number of visitors to the park over the summer, and I was just one more. Like all parks, there were plenty of signs warning visitors not to feed the animals. That made sense. A park ranger, who had only me and two squirrels to talk with, explained to me that every year a

large number of the mule deer in the park die of starvation. The deer looked fine to me. Then he said something that shocked me. He said that whenever they do a necropsy (an autopsy for animals), on these deer that die of starvation, every one of them has a stomach full of food. I found that bizarre, dying of starvation yet having a stomach full of food? That was exactly the case. Their stomachs were full of "human food" that they were not able to digest. Their brains were telling their stomachs they were full, so they just stopped eating the natural food they needed to stay alive.

I sometimes think of those deer as a metaphor for the spiritual life and then I ask myself, "Who or what feeds me? What am I taking into myself that helps me grow spiritually? If I'm not feeding on good food, can I ever hope to become food for anyone else?" The goal of our life here together is not simply to get baptized and then warm a seat at church for the rest of our lives (or worse: to get baptized and never darken the doors of the church). The goal of our life here is to become a Eucharistic people. It is to take in Christ who is **the**

bread for the life of the world and then to become that bread ourselves. The goal is not just to eat, but it is to become food for others.

You may have noticed that we have “food” stories in today’s first reading and in the gospel. In that first reading we hear about the Prophet Elijah. He is a mighty prophet, but he is also a wanted man. He has spoken out against the Jewish king, King Ahab of Israel, and denounced his wife, Jezebel. Almost single-handedly Jezebel, a staunch pagan, displaced the Jewish faith and replaced it with the worship of pagan gods with a whole entourage of false prophets. She has also put a bounty on Elijah’s head. She wants him dead by tomorrow. Elijah flees for his life. That’s where we pick up the story.

Exhausted from running, Elijah sits under a tree and ask God to take his life, after all, he’s probably going to be dead by tomorrow anyways if the witch, Jezebel, gets her way. While waiting for God to respond, Elijah falls asleep. An angel wakes him up and tells him to eat food that seemingly has come out of nowhere. He eats and falls back to sleep. A second time the angel awakes him and tells him to **“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”**

Sometimes life, as you know, is too much for us. It can be overwhelming especially when we feel we have to face something daunting alone. Notice in the story God doesn’t get into a debate with the tired, frustrated, and hopeless Elijah. He doesn’t reprimand Elijah for his lack of faith or that Elijah wants his life to just end, like now. God is the God of life, not death. So, God does not assist Elijah in ending his life; he just feeds him. God provides food for Elijah while Elijah is asleep, so that when he wakes up, it’s just there. When you don’t feel fed, you’re on the way to dying. Some people no longer feel fed in their marriage; they’re dying lying next to the person who is supposed to be the most important person in their life. Some are dying at work, a work that doesn’t give them any meaning or fulfillment. Some people are dying from their experience of Church that no longer feeds them. It begs the question, “Am I being fed?” It’s not a question of being perfectly satisfied or having all

our needs placated 24/7. That's a utopia that is unrealistic and, in the end, causes more pain than happiness. Rather, it's a deeper question of where we draw our life from. It's interesting that God only acts in this story after Elijah has fallen asleep. Sleep, when not done during Mass, can be a very powerful access point with the divine in our lives. The Scripture attest to that in many stories where God comes to someone in a dream. Apart from a weakened state on your death bed, you are never weaker nor more vulnerable than when you are sleeping. Sleep is a place of surrender. You fall asleep. Try to "will" yourself to sleep and sleep becomes almost impossible. You also fall in love long before you ever grow in love. Falling in love, falling asleep, falling down stair or falling on ice, means you're not in control. In dream world, when we have finally fallen asleep, it might be the only time God can do something with us. Always pay attention to your dreams even though 98% of them seem to be absolute nonsense.

When Elijah awakens, he is not reprimanded by God for his weakness. In his weakness Elijah is able to allow God to take over. It's almost as if when we are at our weakest, most vulnerable, most powerless point, when we are unable to bring about any good on our own, God says, "Finally, I've got you where I always wanted you. Finally, you've realized you can't do it on your own and were never meant to do it on your own. Finally, you have stopped filling yourself with "human" food that, like the mule deer, leaves you starving in the end." It's similar to what Paul experienced when he said, "***When I am weak, it is then that I am strong***" (2 Cor. 12:9). When we at long last learn to call on God, usually because we've exhausted our own resources, we—in that moment—are strong. "Faith allows us deliberately to live in a shaky position so that we have to rely on Another" (Richard Rohr).

Sometimes life circumstances, things beyond our control, drag us down. Other times, we struggle with the consequences of our own poor choices. When one poor choice leads to another, eventually this become baggage and weighs us down. The addict in us keeps looking for temporary fixes. This only

leads to more hunger, more addiction and the false belief that “I can handle things on my own.”

Recently I read a book entitled, The Happiest Man on Earth: The Beautiful Life of an Auschwitz Survivor. This 100-year-old Jewish man writes a book about being to hell and back again, in the Nazi concentration camp, yet entitles his book The Happiest Man on Earth. He let go of all the baggage that should have dragged him down and made him a bitter, old man. But, there is nothing of that in him, and it's not just because this horrible, unjust experience is 80 years in the past. Even at the height of his suffering, when suffering and death were all around him, he dug deeper to feed on food that would feed his hope. And, thus, he became food for others. There was little to no food available in the concentration camp, but this man was alive.

I think of the mule deer in Bryce Canyon that ate the wrong food and died of starvation. I think of this man who ate the right food and not only survived but thrived. But mostly I think of Jesus who tells us, ***“I am the bread of life. Whoever believes has eternal life.”***

~Fr. Phil