

John the Baptist would probably recommend a nifty snack of locusts and wild honey. The Apostle Paul tells Timothy, in a letter named after his friend and coworker, "... take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." Read Leviticus 11 and you'll have to stop snacking on camel or rock badger. In the book of Acts; Peter, the disciple who sunk like a rock when he tried to walk on water had a dream in which God commanded him to pick an unclean animal to eat from a large sheet menu that dropped out of the clouds.

But...unless we buy into one of those whacky "Bible diet" ideas featured on YouTube or Pintrest, we rarely chose the Holy Scriptures for our *Bon Appetite* menu planning. Many of us, especially those of us who enjoy cooking shows, would probably admit that we would prefer to leave our meal inspirations to chefs like Gordon Ramsey, Rachel Ray, Wolfgang Puck, and Guy Fieri. That is until we decide we are looking for a little comfort food, and with that being the case, the Bible might be a great place to find nourishing inspiration.

I'm fairly certain many of us are familiar with one of the most famous stories about Elijah. Haggard and despondent, he escapes to the desert and dives under a "solitary broom tree" to die. Eventually though, after being fed and nourished by a divine messenger and after a journey to Mt. Horeb, God comes and meets him, not in a fire, or a thundering earthquake, but through a still, small voice. But, what most of us probably don't remember is that Elijah was in no condition to hear the still, small voice if God, until he'd listened to that loud, big voice in the pit of his stomach.

Elijah needed some food and drink badly....so an "angel of the Lord" had to insist — twice — that he take on nourishment before he began a 40-day retreat to the cleft of the "mount of God." Elijah needed strengthening. Elijah needed some comfort food. And I'm certain that most of us, if not all of us would admit that so do we! We not only need it, we want it, we love it, we gotta have it!

Comfort foods, of course, are the things we eat and drink when needing a sense of reward, security, calm or reprieve from life's circumstances. They're things we enjoy for their familiarity, simplicity, or because we have fond memories of past enjoyment from them. In the U.S. it's apple pie, cheddar-smothered baked potatoes, French fries, mom's meatloaf, mac and cheese or double-fudge brownies. In Asian cultures it's pho or green onion pancakes. Indians prefer hot, creamy chai or yogurt and rice dishes as their source of sweet relief. Food, after all, speaks to our souls. Perhaps that is why we often call it Soul food?

While comfort foods are as diverse, as the tastes of those who choose them, research shows a couple of interesting trends. Many foods people report as comfort foods are high in carbohydrates, such as sugars, rice, and wheat products. It's thought that comfort eaters learn to choose high-carb foods because the brain responds to their consumption by releasing the natural tranquilizer *tryptophan*. In other words, carbs have the power to calm us.

The Bible even has several versions of food serving as comfort to people. Manna from heaven for the wandering Israelites. To those seeking water and bread in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus offers himself as the living water and the bread of life. And in today's first lesson Elijah collapses of exhaustion. He's starving, and thirsty, after his desert flight from his enemies, and while he is sleeping an angel provides bread and water to strengthen him for his journey.

But let's be honest — manna, bread, water — who would choose those things as their comfort food? Picture television chef Gordon Ramsey annoyed, and with a disgusted look on his face exclaiming, "Tonight's meal will be a delightful stone-baked, corn-meal flatbread and a refreshing jar of water." Who are we kidding? So to understand the comfort of this passage, we have to look beyond the calories, the richness, or the sweetness. The comfort food is found in something else entirely.

This becomes apparent as we begin to realize the busyness, the running, and the exhaustion of the previous seasons of Elijah's life: • Basically, his entire career has been to confront and critique Ahab, the king and most powerful man in Israel. • He's been used by God to usher in a three-year drought upon the land. • He's subsisted in the wilderness, living like he's on a Discovery Channel survival show. • He's not only enraged the king, but now Queen Jezebel — the real pants-wearer in the family — has vowed a death sentence upon him within the next 24 hours. • He's run to the other side of Palestine, left his servant behind, and stumbled despondently into the solitude of the desert: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

In short, this guy is cooked! As Anna Carter Florence a Professor of Preaching at Columbia Seminary puts it: "Maybe he's was just having 'one of those days.' You wake up, you eat breakfast, you slaughter 450 prophets of Baal, y'know. Well it's *hard work* to be the *only one* left. It is no fun."

Sounds kind of familiar to those of us who feel like we are the ones doing all the work, doesn't it? Especially to those who dream of a 9 to 5 workday as they think about all the times they take on the role of a chauffeur for: sporting events, piano recitals, and other after school activities? Or maybe you feel like you serve on too many committees, or that you sit in on too many meetings? Or perhaps there aren't enough hours in the day for you to complete your To-Do list? Or maybe you need some relief and escape from a painful or difficult hardship — especially if you have recently found yourself dealing with the painful loss of a friend or a family member? Or if you are feeling the emptiness of lonely singleness with no bright outlooks for love? Sometimes in our suffering, like Elijah we may feel like it would be better for it all too just end.

In today's story, however, God chooses to meet the Prophet in the apparent chaos of his life — in his fatigue, in his busyness, in his stress, in his depression, in

his questioning, in his self-doubt. This is where the comfort food comes in — and it isn't found in the bread or the water provided by the Lord's angelic messenger.

First, *God meets Elijah's needs through his presence within the circumstances, not in the removal of the circumstances.* Through his angel bearing food and rest, God brings his presence to Elijah's physical needs. Through his own words, God brings his presence to Elijah's spiritual needs. And it is the presence of God which is what Elijah needs the most.

Later in the beginning of verse 15 the Lord declares to the Prophet: "Go, return on your way ...". That is His spiritual direction. As part of comforting Elijah and meeting his needs, He sends him right back to the place that either caused, or was the location of his difficulties. Similarly, God doesn't always remove the hard circumstances of our lives, nor does he allow us to run away from all that challenges us. In this case, God joins Elijah in it. He gives him purpose within it. He gives him a remnant — a community — within it.

Second — in a detail we should try our best not to overlook — *God meets Elijah through silence and solitude.* So it's more than comfort food. Notice that God meets Elijah while he is alone. In verses 3 and 4, there's an apparent redundant emphasis on the idea of Elijah's solitude: "[H]e left his servant there" and "[H]e himself went a day's journey into the wilderness." Solitude. Away from other people. Alone. While he is by himself, God meets his physical needs: he is given rest through back-to-back naps, an angel touches him, wakes him, up, and miraculously presents him with food to nourish his fatigued body.

If, Elijah was hanging out with friends, or in a crowd worshipping at the temple, what are the chances God would meet his needs for rest and sustenance in the same way? Consider also the dramatic way God speaks to Elijah later in verses 11-15. How many times can you find in the Bible where God is speaking audibly to individuals when they're among noisy crowds of people? Moses had to travel up

a mountain to talk to God. Samuel can't hear God while Eli is nearby — so he goes off to be by himself. God seems to understand our need for solitude.

And later during a mountaintop experience, as God passes by Elijah to bring him comfort and encouragement, the Lord wasn't found in the dramatic wind, earthquake, or fire. No, the Creator was present in “a sound of sheer silence.” Talk about a deafening silence! Elijah knew God was in that silence because he covered his face in preparation to hear from his God. Which begs the question, is your life ever quiet enough — free enough from noise and distraction — that you might hear God's whisper and know his voice? If not, what do you think might be keeping you from hearing God?

If we were to take the time to study the rest of the story we would discover that meeting God changed Elijah. It rested and refreshed him. It reset his attitude and lifted his depression. It prepared him for life once he went down the mountain again. It restored his sense of God's purpose in his life. His solitude filled him up with God, so that he was spiritually and emotionally healthy enough to be around people again. All from meeting with God alone and in the quiet.

Take a moment to close your eyes and think about all the things you feel like running away from. What makes you exhausted? What leaves you questioning, despondent, depressed? Do you think that you can try to slow down a bit? Is it possible for you to find a way to be alone in solitude, even if only for a few minutes? Can you figure out a way to turn off all the sounds surrounding you, so that it is quiet enough for God to meet with you?

Of course, comfort foods bring us security, calm and reprieve. But how much more does a comforting *God* bring us? God meets our needs with his presence *in* all the circumstances of life, even if he doesn't always remove our difficulties or hardships. And quite often God's presence is most easily discerned when we choose solitude and silence to seek God. So let's try to cut out the clatter

and the noise and seek the comfort and peace that is only available to us through our Creator! God still speaks, but sometimes it may be in a really small, still voice.... So let's do whatever we can to hear Him. Amen.