

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In her book, *“The Road to Santiago,”* Kathryn Harrison shares her experiences of her 400-mile pilgrimage from St. Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, a sacred site where a shrine honoring the apostle James welcomes those who complete the journey. Harrison wrote that she was looking for an experience that would be both physically and psychologically demanding. She set off with a heavy pack, very little Spanish, no hotel reservations, and a willingness to go where the road would lead her. On her way, she ate whatever was available—strawberries, bread, jam, and sunflower seeds. Even though it was simple food, it was delicious because every morsel made her journey possible, along with the kindness of strangers who became her companions on the way and helped to make the journey a life-altering experience.

Readings of today invite us to share the travels of other pilgrims and to learn from them life’s lessons. Elijah, who is featured in the first reading, had grown weary of his life’s journey, which he hoped would soon come to an end. Elijah was fleeing for his life, as Jezebel is determined to kill him because he vanquished the prophets of Baal and put them to death. Sitting under a broom tree, he prays, *“This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”* There are certain experiences in life that tend to make us give up and be gone. It can be the loss of a job, a home, a lifestyle, a spouse, or even of one’s good health—all these can be an occasion for wanting to stop the pilgrimage that is life.

But God had other plans for the prophet. To that end, God strengthened Elijah with food and sent him a messenger with instructions to keep going. His journey was not to end there in the desert under a broom tree, regardless of how discouraged the prophet had become. Elijah’s experience calls for a similar acceptance of God’s guidance.

We also realize the need for good spiritual nutrition—the need to eat and drink daily from the bread of life that God has given in Jesus. Jesus’ gift of himself as bread is once again the theme of the Gospel. Because he claimed to be heaven-sent, and because he offered bread that he described as superior to the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert, Jesus became an object of derision. His companions on the journey began to murmur against him, to question his origins, and to criticize his teachings.

Anyone who has taken a trip with disgruntled traveling companions can sympathize with Jesus. Questions like, “Are we there yet?” and “How far is it?” and complaints like, “It’s too hot!” “It’s too cold!” “I’m hungry!” “I’m thirsty!” “I’m bored!” and “I want to go home!” make a very unpleasant journey. Despite the murmuring, Jesus was patient. However, he did not alter or dilute his message to appease his detractors. Jesus insisted that the bread he would provide for every believer’s journey would be his flesh for the life of the world. The disciples would only begin to see later, when their journey together would lead first to the upper room for their last supper together and, then to the cross, where he would be broken and given over to death for them. Only when their journey led them again to the upper room and then to the seaside breakfast—where he again offered them bread—did the first disciples truly begin to see and believe and accept the purpose of their pilgrimage. We continue to avail ourselves of the bread Jesus gives to sustain and encourage our journey home to him and to God.

With that nourishment, he continues his sojourn in the desert for 40 more days, a trek that is reminiscent of the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years. Elijah’s quest will culminate at Mount Horeb. There, like Moses, he encounters God. No matter what was in Elijah’s food, they could not be as powerful as the Eucharist. Jesus speaks of the Eucharist today, when he says, “I am the bread of life.”

Christ commands us to put aside the skepticism of the world so that we might recognize and relish the reality of his presence in the Eucharist and, taking that Eucharist as the real bread of life, we will be strengthened for whatever hardships we face in life. St. Paul wrote that Christ has given himself for us as an offering to God. Let us always come rejoicing to this altar, to this banquet, knowing that as we receive the Lord, our journeys will never be too long for us. It is through the Eucharist, the Bread of Life, that we can live life God’s way with love and compassion.