

Homily for August 9, 2009 (19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B)
1 Kgs 19:4-8; Ps 34:2-9; Eph 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51

A couple of years ago, Southwest Airlines had an ad campaign encouraging people to take advantage of their low fares and customer service. The theme was, “Wanna get away?” and the commercials featured people caught in embarrassing or compromising situations.

I thought of those ads as I reflected on today’s scriptures and thought of Elijah, Paul and Jesus. All had good reasons for wanting to get away from their particular situations; yet all found or received the strength that they needed to deal with them.

Let’s face it. Virtually all of us have bad days from time to time. Sometimes they seem to run together and wear us down. Think of all of the folks right now who are facing the foreclosure of their homes, their unemployment benefits running out, and mounting bills. At other times we have to deal with something sudden and *really, really* bad, an event or experience that is like an emotional eclipse and seems to put our entire lives in darkness: the sudden loss of a loved one, a horrible accident, or a terminal illness.

Sometimes our bad days are of our own making. If you’re having a bad day because a police officer wrote you a ticket for going 30 miles an hour over the speed limit, don’t blame him. If you’re suffering from a horrible hangover from all the “fun” you had last night, you won’t have to go further than the mirror to find the source of your pain.

At other times, others cause our bad days: the careless driver who rear-ended your *parked* car in the lot of the local grocery store; or the burglar who broke into your house while you were on vacation and stole your plasma TV, leather coat, and the jewelry your mother gave to you as a family heirloom.

Sometimes we have bad days as a consequence of choices we and others have made. We have disagreements with each other; however, because each side decides that it *has* to win, neither is willing to compromise. The disagreement then becomes an argument and then may escalate into a full-fledged fight.

It happens in families; it happens in Congress; and it can even happen in church! The early church at Ephesus to whom St. Paul was writing in our second reading created its own misery by allowing itself to be overtaken by “bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling. Talk about dysfunctional!

Elijah was having what you might call a *really, really* bad day! Our first reading from 1 Kings 19 featured the prophet imploring God, “This is enough, O Lord! Take my life...;” and others—most notably King Ahab of Israel’s wife, Jezebel—were more than willing to help fulfill Elijah’s wishes.

Elijah had fled to the desert following God's dramatic display of power at Mt. Carmel, when the prophet faced down and then eventually killed the 400 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Jezebel, a devotee of Baal, wasn't happy and out of revenge and pride sought to have Elijah killed.

Exhausted not only from his confrontation and escape from Jezebel but also from years of faithful work as a prophet among a people and a king who appeared to have little use for the Lord, Elijah just wanted it all to be over. He just wanted to get away. God, however, had different plans.

Providing food, drink and rest for Elijah in the midst of a hostile environment, God also encouraged him to continue the journey.

Have you recently had an "Elijah moment," when you were reaching the end of your rope and just wanted to say, "OK, Lord, I've had it?" I had one this past week. Because of several provincial celebrations and Mass this Sunday, I found myself having to prepare *four* homilies in the midst of meetings, travel and other commitments. Through the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit, I managed to get through the process of writing the first three homilies without too many problems. But the last homily—this one—proved to be a real problem. I couldn't figure out how to start it and I wasn't sure what the word was calling me to share. I was experiencing mental and emotional gridlock.

So I did some of what Elijah did in the reading. Though I didn't complain, just said, "Lord, I've had enough;" and I stepped away and took a break for the rest of the night. After joining the friars in evening prayer, I spent an hour in front of the TV eating popcorn and watching Comedy Central. The following morning, after my morning workout, devotions, and a little breakfast, I resumed writing. There were no angels, hearth cakes or jugs of water; but it worked out OK.

Jesus, too, had wearying moments in his life. You may remember from our gospel reading from a couple of weeks ago that following the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, Jesus tried to get away from the crowds to have some time alone. It didn't work. They tracked him down. After trying to teach them of the true meaning of the miracle and inviting them to hunger for the bread of life, Jesus found these same people now "murmuring" against him! John's use of the word "murmur" here is significant, because it parallels the murmuring and grumbling that the people of Israel did against God and his servant Moses during the Exodus.

Instead of complaining and trying to escape from this hard-headed and hard-hearted group, however, Jesus stuck with them and continued to teach, challenge and encourage them. It wasn't easy; but his passionate desire for them to receive the bread of life gave him the strength and courage he needed to continue. Jesus has that same passion for us; and every time we celebrate the Eucharist and share the bread of life he also invites us to partake in that same passion—the kind that can sustain us on good days and on that days where we just want to get away. +