

My brother and his girlfriend came to Chicago to visit me last weekend, and she and I bonded in the morning, united in the gauntlet that is getting him out of bed.

As he sprawled there, I reminded him how rare and special it is that he gets to see me, how precious the opportunity to bask in the warm, generous sunshine of my wit and charm.

He rolled over, as if unimpressed.

I dangled before him promises of the great things awaiting that day, especially the exquisite privilege of my magnificent company.

He looked at me, and lay down again.

Sometimes even an angel of the LORD is not enough to rouse the overtired.

Elijah, unlike my brother, is a holy man, and not a lazy one.

He has a first ballot hall of fame biblical resume; he is the poster boy of prophecy who worked wonders and joined Moses on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured.

He is currently on his way into the wilderness because he is on the run from the queen, who wants to kill him.

He has just humiliated and murdered the prophets of her beloved Baal, god of rain; Elijah talked trash as they danced all day and couldn't squeeze a drop of juice out of the desert sky.

Then Elijah showed them up, with a trench full of water and a saturated sacrifice which, after Elijah's short prayer, God set to smoking with a torch of lightning that launched a cloudburst.

Now Queen Jezebel--maybe you've heard of her--is fried too; she sends an angel, which is to say a messenger, to inform Elijah that she will be murdering him in the next 24 hours.

Elijah runs, first beyond her jurisdiction, then deeper into the desert to find a solitary broom tree, a nice shady place to shrivel down and die.

He prays again, to the same God who rained down vindication and victory for him, this time with his resignation letter.

It is enough, he says, using the same word that when the angel says it is translated "too much."

Now he prays for the sweet release of death.

Nothing happens.

Maybe God rolled over and lay down again.

In any case, God is unresponsive, and Elijah is exhausted.

His eyes are heavy and feet are tired from all that running to save a life he didn't really want, so he drifts off to sleep in the peaceful solitude of the broom tree.

The great prophet falls asleep with prayers unanswered; really, why should we expect anything more for ourselves?

Suddenly, in the middle of his nap, the doorbell rings.

Even there, with his cell phone out of range, somebody finds him.

It's another messenger, an angel with no identification, with water and a freshly baked pastry.

Maybe it's the queen's henchman come to poison him.

Well, in that case, he's an answer to prayer...the sweet release of death, and it smells good too.

*He ate and drank, and lay down again.*

And God lets him sleep, but God doesn't let him die.

God doesn't always give us what we ask for or answer our prayers the way we want.

Those who imagine God to be the great Santa Claus in the sky are not dealing with Elijah's God, and ours.

Our God is much closer than that, and wild and wise, responding to our requests with a depth of attentiveness and freedom we cannot manage ourselves.

And while we sleep off the stress of our recent service, God waits, lurking in our future with plans beyond our guessing.

What Elijah doesn't know as he saws more logs under that broom tree is that God is going to send him deeper into the wilderness, forty days deeper, all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God, the mountain where Moses received the covenant, the mountain where it all started.

God is sending Elijah back to the birthplace of his faith, more than a month's trek through the dusty wilds, to get his head cleared and his ears tuned to hear the next new beginning.

Elijah will stand on the mountain and experience the rush of a violent wind, splitting rocks in pieces, the kind of wind even Chicago would notice...but the LORD is not in the wind.

Elijah will stand on the mountain and experience an earthquake...but the LORD is not in the earthquake.

Elijah will stand on the mountain and experience a fire...but the LORD is not playing *Earth, Wind and Fire*.

The LORD will come to him in something far more haunting and intimidating and beautiful.

The LORD will come to him in silence...sheer, knee-buckling, soul-breaking silence...and then, they will talk.

Elijah will complain again, same old song and dance, same tired refrain about how zealous and faithful and unappreciated he is, and the LORD will listen.

The LORD who lets him sleep will also let him whine.

The LORD is so much more patient than we deserve, but also more persistent.

When Elijah has said his peace, again, the LORD tells him the plan.

He is going to start a revolution.

He is going to anoint a new king while the old king and queen are still on the throne.

The LORD has big plans for the prophet and the people, bigger than anything Elijah could possibly imagine or want.

There will be no peaceful death beneath the broom tree; the LORD wants more.

The great theologian and author C.S. Lewis has said,

*Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord find our desires, not too strong, but too weak.*

*We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.*

*We are far too easily pleased.* (Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," Theology, Nov. 1941)

It can be hard for us to realize this, of course, not just because of the sprawling stupor in which our rat race existence leaves us, but also because when the LORD does reach us, when the angel or the Christ arrives on our scene, it is with grace so ordinary and unremarkable that we roll over and lay down again, underwhelmed and unimpressed.

When Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread from heaven, the meal ticket of eternal life, the crowds complain, because they know his parents.

Elijah is visited by the angel of the LORD, who makes him a very nice breakfast, and he's back in bed asleep without so much as an introduction or a thank you.

It's only bread and water, really, like it's only bread and wine.

It's only a stranger; it's only a familiar face.

Still, for us today, when God arrives and beckons us, it's with not so much to look at.

God usually doesn't show up in wind and earthquake and fire.

God usually doesn't show up with the answer to prayer that we wanted, or in the style and timeframe we requested.

But God does arrive with water and bread and wine.

God arrives in the angelic voices of strangers and the predictable faces of people too familiar to be anything but nuisances or friends.

God comes for us in boring ways and with big plans, like a little block party with our neighbors that explodes into Wrigleyville SummerFest where we worship in the street...with the same old preacher and the same old one another and the same old wine and bread.

But a little bit of bread can carry us a very long way.

*Get up and eat.*