

A little background about today's first reading... Jezebel—you may have heard the name. She was an evil queen who reigned in Israel about 850 years before the birth of Christ. One of her main goals in life was to eliminate faith and worship of the Lord God Yahweh in Israel. At the same time, there also lived in Israel, the prophet Elijah, who was dedicated to *servicing* Yahweh. Naturally these two would clash.

Elijah had just worked a powerful miracle on Mt. Carmel, a place now known as Haifa, which dramatically demonstrated that Yahweh was truly God and the gods Jezebel promoted were a joke. It is a great story, almost comical—we heard it in the weekday readings a few weeks ago. If you weren't at Mass for those days, check it out in the first Book of Kings. But Jezebel, instead of being converted, became a sore loser, and she sent her army after Elijah to kill him. Elijah literally ran for his life into the desert in southern Judah, and this is where we find him in today's first reading. He is hungry, tired and deeply depressed. But God did not desert his faithful prophet. We hear part of the story today. This passage was chosen for today's first reading because it tells of the special food God gave Elijah.

The angel told Elijah: “Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you.” What must have been in those little hearth cakes? Talk about energy drinks and power bars! The Jews ate hearth cakes a lot, which I believe were something like tortillas. No one knows the hidden ingredient in those hearth cakes the angel offered Elijah.

Jesus is offering the people of his own day a food infinitely more potent than Elijah's hearth cakes: “bread that comes down

from heaven so that one may eat it and not die... whoever eats this bread will live forever.” If a person really believed this, wouldn’t he make sure he had a steady diet of this marvelous food? But Jesus’ listeners thought he had flipped out, making such outlandish claims.

Today we know a lot about food and its consequences—what is good for us and what we should avoid—even if we don’t always follow what we know we should do. *Jesus* is telling us there is something in the food *he* offers that will benefit us *for eternity*. It is we who will be the losers, if we ignore what he says.

That is one of the greatest tests of our faith in Jesus—to believe something we can’t understand, and to believe it *simply because we trust the one who told us it is so*. It’s no wonder he tells us we need God’s help to accept this: “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

I have lived with this mystery since I made my First Communion in Sacred Heart Church in Bethlehem on May 1, 1955. I wondered at the time: How can this be? But Sister, Father and my parents and grandparents told me it was so. That was enough for me. And now, nearly 70 years later, I have spent thousands of hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament, and frequently I have sensed Jesus’ presence—sensed, not just believed. But in the end, I have been helped in this belief by simply choosing to take Jesus at his word: “This is my body” and “this is my blood.”

I have never had visions or ecstasies like some of the saints. I have to believe in the Eucharist as much as any of you. Sometimes I think it requires *more* faith of me, when I realize my own faults and weaknesses and failures, and to think that I can say those words of Jesus over bread and wine, and at that moment the bread and wine is changed to become Jesus himself. Whoa!

Elijah didn't know what was in those hearth cakes. In faith, he ate them and began his journey to Mt. Horeb as the angel directed him to do. We have been told what is in the food Jesus offers us, that it is Jesus himself. We simply have to do what the angel told Elijah: "get up and eat, else the journey will be too long." We skip meals sometimes when we are in a hurry. But this is one meal we cannot skip. We need the strength it gives us as we make *our* journey... to eternal life.