

[Readings: I Kings 19:4-8; Ps. 34; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51]

When undertaking a journey -- whether it is a vacation, a pilgrimage, relocation, or your life-voyage as a whole -- you need to prepare appropriately. Under-packing is dangerous. Over-packing is burdensome. Lugging the wrong equipment is frustrating. Every inch and every ounce of luggage has to be made to count. Some things are always useful, no matter where you're headed.

Maybe Elijah failed to bring good humor along that day he fled into the desert. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were out for his blood, true, but throwing himself under a broom tree and praying for death was not a helpful response to his dilemma. Also, he went on a day's journey into the desert without water and food. While accustomed to living by a spring with ravens bringing him sustenance, he might have been pushing his luck this time. Evidently, Elijah was unfamiliar with the saying: God helps those who help themselves.

Elijah was despairing -- again. This time it wasn't only famine and drought. His land and king had gone bad, the prophets who might have pointed things in a better direction were dead, and someone wanted to kill him, and so he decided to lie down under a tree and wait to die. "Enough, Lord, I've had enough. Take me."

Have you ever had "one of those days?" "One of those lives?" I am strongly attracted to this scene in today's First Reading involving Elijah under the broom tree. First of all, what is a "broom tree?" I didn't know what it was, so in my vivid imagination, I thought it was an aluminum pole with broomsticks sticking out of it!

Actually, it is a juniper tree. It grows to look like a huge broccoli plant with a tall stem and “just enough” branches with needles to provide shade for only one person resting underneath it. I’ve been “under the broom tree” plenty of times.

Elijah says, “This is enough, O Lord! Take my life. Please.” It might sound like a stand-up comic delivering the classic joke. Do you remember the comic Henny Youngman? He was popular for over fifty years in the last century. His famous line was “Take my wife... Please! He was the guest entertainer at our very first Presbyteral Convocation up at Boyne Mountain back in 1985.

He was flown in, and an anonymous donor covered his speaker’s fee. He was tall and husky like me. His first line when got on stage was, “This is a gonna be tough room to entertain. 300 priests and an 80-year-old JEW!” He brought down the house!

“Take my wife, please” brings a smile. But when Elijah says, “Take my LIFE, PLEASE, it’s not something to laugh about. He and I are very sincere as we speak those words.

I was always trembling “under the broom tree” during final exams week in college and in the seminary, weighing death a better option than that last big push to learn what four months of classes and books had not yet taught me. I found myself hopelessly swooning “under the broom tree” every time relationships failed to fulfill their lofty promises. I was swept “under the broom tree” when seemingly endless parish problems knock the wind out of my sails.

And when loved ones started dying all around me too young and too soon, it suddenly occurs to me that it would be far easier on my heart if I just went with them to join them in eternity.

When I watch the evening news, I find myself drifting into a stream of thought not unlike the prayer of lament found so often in the books of the prophets and in the Book of Psalms.

Enough, O Lord, of wars and violence, crime and disease, of famine and hunger! Enough of adults and children being kidnapped, abused or killed! Enough terrorism and fear! Enough hatred and injustice! Lord, how can You tolerate it for so many centuries?

In what ways do YOU want to chuck it all, “sit under a tree of despair and pray for death?” And then, how does God send YOU an angel to nudge you forward and give you strength and hope for life’s journey? Who is that angel in YOUR life?

It could be in the form of an unanticipated reprieve, a phone call or a sudden visitor, a friend, a stranger’s kind word, or what we often call a “lucky break.” Grace arrives and a bridge appears over troubled waters, enabling us to cross to the other side unscathed. It’s the hour when we might remember to say:

“Taste and see the goodness of the Lord!”

In today’s Second Reading, St. Paul reminds us of the excess baggage that weighs us down on the journey: bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling.

What situations infuriate you the most or spur feelings of bitterness or malice? When we act out on those emotions, we “sadden the Holy Spirit” that is within us. What steps can you take to remember Jesus in those moments?

St. Paul also reminds us what items we DO need to pack before we leave, or to discover on the way: kindness, compassion, forgiveness. We bring this to church when we assemble for Sunday

Mass. And we place them on God's altar along with bread and wine for God to bless and to transform into life-giving grace.

As we journey together after Mass, the single most critical item to take -- on any journey -- is confidence in God. Confidence literally means, "With faith." I do not go on this journey through life alone. God is my co-pilot, or at least God is somewhere in the car with us! In traffic, I saw a bumper sticker that says, "God is my co-pilot." Then both our cars passed a church where the marquis sign read, "If God is your co-pilot, you need to switch seats!" God will provide the bread for us, as well as the road we're on, when GOD is our ultimate destination. AMEN!