

19th Sunday B August 9, 2015

Elijah had it rough: he is failure as a prophet, he is in the desert and starving, and Elijah is in fear, because no less than the queen is trying to kill him. Elijah lies down and prays to die—many of us know the feeling—until an angel gave him *miraculous bread* so that he could carry on.

Fr. Joseph Nyanti, the visiting missionary who preached last weekend and stayed with us until this/yesterday afternoon—Fr. Joseph has it rough too. Fr. Joseph is from Liberia, West Africa; life is not easy in Liberia. “What do you eat back home?” I ask. “We are on the coast, so we eat fish; and we have vegetables and rice.” “No beef or pork?” Fr. Joe looked at me and laughed. People in the backcountry eat bush meat, which turns out to be anything they can catch. Bush meat is protein; it also carries Ebola.

He was terrified by Ebola, he says. For six months, the country shut down; no one left their home except for essential jobs. The government ordered every church to be closed, but the priests said, “The people have to be able to pray together to get through this!” So there was Mass, no Sign of Peace, of course, no hugs. For months, Fr. Joe did not know if his people were alive or dead.

Only 15 priests in his diocese, I learned, for 150,000 Catholics, some of them deep in the countryside. His parish’s weekly offering is \$80.00. Fr. Joe cannot afford to buy the black clerical shirt that he is supposed to wear. His parish cannot afford the new Lectionary and Roman Missal that was mandated three years ago. He asks me about Mass Intentions; the

usual gift for a Mass Intention is \$5.00. Fr. Joe hopes I have some extra; the \$5.00 would mean a lot.

Every Liberian should have enough money, he says. The problem is government corruption. It doesn't have to be this bad. He shakes his head.

The prophet Elijah sat down under a tree and told God that he had had enough, that he couldn't take any more. Elijah prayed that God would take his life.

Not Fr. Joe. This man from Liberia smiled and laughed easily, enjoyed his meals with us and the people he met. He seemed happy and peaceful and hopeful, even as he spoke of returning to Liberia in October.

Where is the strength to be joyful when \$5.00 means so much and a hamburger would be a feast? What miraculous food keeps Fr. Joe going?

I wanted to find out, so I watched him this week: walking the grounds, praying the Rosary; plenty of time before the Tabernacle in our Eucharistic Chapel; being sure he could celebrate daily Mass; reading quietly in his room; listening to the radio sometimes, but never watching TV—because there wasn't one. In short, every day Fr. Joseph Nyanti fills up his mind and heart with the things of God. That is why even in Liberia, the journey is not too long.

This weekend, Fr. Joe will be preaching in a parish north of Dayton. And he will read Jesus say in John chapter 6: "this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die." Fr. Joe eats bread from heaven a lot. That is why he does not weaken. What a great example for me, for all of us.