

Psalm 34:1-8

John 6:35, 41-51

1 Kings 19:4-8

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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“밥 먹었어?” (“Have You Eaten?”)

A couple of years ago, there was an article in the New Yorker called “Crying in H Mart” by Michelle Zauner. She recently expanded that story and published it as a book, a memoir. I haven’t had a chance to read the book yet, but I remember when I read the article, it touched upon a lot of feelings about my own mother and growing up in a Korean household. For those of you who have no idea what H Mart is, it is I believe, the largest Asian supermarket chain in the United States. It started with a single store and has expanded to more than 97 stores across the United States. If you know, you get super excited when you hear there’s an H Mart coming near you.

In the article, she shares about losing her mother and that it is specifically food, Korean food, that triggers all the grief of her loss. And it’s not only a certain smell or dish that brings about a memory, but the realization that her mother showed her love by making sure she was eating and being fed by good Korean food.

This resonated with me deeply.

My own mother is alive and well, and this article reminded me of what it is I have in her and through my own cultural upbringing. You see, almost every time I see my mom, from the time I was young to even now if she’s here staying with us in our home, if I leave the house and come back, she asks me, “밥 먹었어?” This translates into “Have you eaten?” Mind you, this is the phrase as the greeting. I walk in the door and it’s not “Hi Irene, how was your day? Or “Hi Irene, what did you do today?” It was always, “Irene, 밥 먹었어?” And I am not even exaggerating this, if I said I had not eaten and implied I was hungry, food somehow just showed up in front of me within a few minutes. If I had, I would just get annoyed at the question because I would be coming back from lunch with friends and she’d still ask me “밥 먹었어?” Did you eat something? “Yeah Mom, I just came back from eating with my friends, remember?”

Even now, at 41 years old, when my mom is visiting us, she still always asks me this question when she sees me...and now asks it to Marion as well. In fact, food preparation and its readiness for us is so central to who she is when she visits that we barely ever set foot in our kitchen when she’s here. She’s almost always cooking in there. Marion’s favorite dish (which takes hours to prepare) is ALWAYS the first thing she cooks, much to my dismay, ☺, but she knows our favorite Korean foods

and when she's here, those foods always make an appearance or two or three. When she leaves, there is always a full pot of something on our stove and a freezer full of food. She is literally making sure that there is food that she's made for us somewhere in our home at all times, even when she's gone.

By now, I'm sure it is SUPER obvious to you all listening that this is her way of showing love. I've learned that this is not only my mom's personal way of showing love and affection, but this is actually a Korean cultural way of showing love even above verbally saying "I love you" which I hear less often than 밥 먹었어? mo 먹었어? is actually a question that family members and people who are close ask upon *greeting* each other. It's more affectionate than simply Hello.

This way of speaking to each other by my mom and aunts to us was so normal within my family and extended family that I had never really absorbed that this was different or unique or that it was literally my mom's way of saying to me over and over again my whole life "I love you" until a couple of years ago. You see, when I had my first child, Ezra, my mom was here, and her primary job, not because I even asked for it, was to feed me. In the haze of the newborn days, I don't remember a lot, but I remember sitting down to a meal that would somehow miraculously show up in front of me anytime I needed to eat. Sometimes even in anticipation of the fact that I needed to eat. She was always feeding me, and I only started recognizing the deeper meaning of affection and love that was behind that feeding when I was at the most exhausted, vulnerable, trying to heal, and emotional time of my life. One day it occurred to me that she could have focused her energies on the baby, but instead, she focused them to the child that she bore, and made sure I was eating to help sustain me for what I've heard called the long journey of motherhood.

It might not sound like the same thing at all, but I see the similarities in the exhaustion and rollercoaster of the newborn days and the exhaustion and emotional rollercoaster that Elijah has just been through in our Old Testament reading today. And even if you don't know what Elijah had just been through, it becomes clear quickly in the selected lectionary reading for today that he was not doing well, mentally, physically, or emotionally.

The quick rated G version of the background to this particular story in 1 Kings is that Elijah has just defeated the prophets of a false idol god ... and it was not pretty. Just imagine a lot of violence and maybe even some fire coming down from heaven. Details aside, Elijah is the victor when it all goes down. But when it's all over, he's not feeling victorious and glorious... Queen Jezebel, who is MAD that Elijah won, has called for a death warrant on his life, and where we started our reading today at verse 4 is with Elijah who has run far into the wilderness, collapsing under a tree, and praying for it all to be over. In his supposed victory, he is feeling defeated. He's

exhausted, emotional, and does not know what to do next. He feels so helpless he's not sure he can go on anymore and he collapses into exhausted sleep. He cannot imagine any kind of reprieve and so he prays that God would just take him and then sleeps.

Scripture then says, "Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again."

During the haze of the newborn days, I literally remember my mom knowing it was soon time to feed the baby again and knowing I had not yet eaten anything myself, waking me up and saying "Irene, (bap mugga)" which literally means, "Irene, eat some rice-eat something." And I would get up to food that was already hot and prepared for me, eat, drink, and go back to sleep.

For Elijah, it doesn't even phase him that deep into the wilderness, in his despair and fatigue, an angel who had been preparing food right next to him, gently wakes him up and invites him to eat and drink. I mean, it's kind of a big deal if an angel nudges you awake and cooks a meal for you, but Elijah does not recognize that. He just eats, and goes back to sleep like this is totally normal.

And then the angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' And so Elijah got up and ate and drank again. This time, the meal that was prepared for him gave him the strength and endurance he needed to continue on for another forty days and forty nights to get to the mount of God.

What's particularly beautiful about this passage to me is that the angel's role is not to try and fix Elijah's problems or minimize his feelings and experience. The angel does not make false promises or question his faith because of his angst and doubt. She doesn't deny his reality or offer a shortcut. Instead, the angel just invites Elijah to eat. The meal is prepared for him and the angel makes sure that he eats something acknowledging that the journey ahead is long. He has to go through it. But he can choose how he goes-famished or fed. Accompanied or alone. Recognizing and accepting the gifts of nourishment in front of him or rejecting them.

Friends, I don't know what each of you are going through right now in your lives, but I do know that we are all on this journey of life and faith together. And I don't know what kind of strength or fortitude you might need in these days, but I do want to ask you, 밥 먹었어? Have you eaten? And if you find yourself hungry this day, do you recognize the provisions that are being given to you in this time? Are you accepting them? Do you see the angels that God sends your way, ready to feed you

and sustain you for the journey? It might seem normal or not a big deal, but it is a miracle...a small hallelujah along the pathway. Can you receive it even if it's not what you might expect or think you need?

There will continue to be times where we are Elijah in this situation. And it might take us a long time like it did for me and my own mother to shift our lens into what it is that translates into affection, love, and goodness for our lives and not take it for granted.

But friends, just as we are Elijah along the journey, I also do not want you to forget that YOU are also someone's angel. Just as you've been fed in your life, you have also fed someone, encouraged them, given them a little push to keep going. Maybe you knew it, maybe you didn't, but if there's another word I want you to be able to receive today, it is not only the recognition that we all need to eat and be fed, but to believe that you are that angel, that bread, that rice, that nourishment for someone as well. You are not only an Elijah that is in need of care or endurance for the journey, but you are also the angel who cares, prepares, and feeds. It is a give and take balance, and no matter which one you are in your life right now at this moment, it is right, and it is good, and it is okay.

We don't get to finish the story of Elijah today, but we find out what it is that carries him just to the next step, to the next leg of his journey.

Friends, today, may we recognize those glimpses of nourishment and grace in our own lives today. May we see the miracle that it is when we are gently awoken and encouraged to eat, to get up, and to be strengthened for the next step. May we all find freezers full of homemade food made with love to ensure that we can keep going even when they are not there anymore. And may we remember that we too, are the ones called to accompany and feed, and to show love and compassion in the way the angel does for Elijah.

밥 먹었어?" Have you eaten?

Amen.