



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
8 August 2021



Sermon: From Depletion to Renewal
Erin Tolar, Janice Kominski, Matthew Wiedle

1 Kings 19:4-8

Erin: Narrator

Janice: Angel/Messenger from God

Matt: Elijah

Erin: The Old Testament reading for today is from 1 Kings 19:4-8.

But [Elijah] himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die:

Matt: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Erin: Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him,

Janice: "Get up and eat."

Erin: 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.

The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said,

Janice: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Erin: He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

The Word of the LORD.

Janice and Matt: Thanks be to God. **(Janice and Matt then cameras off)**

Erin: Despair

Have you ever felt the weight of the world come crashing down on you? I know I have. I've felt that a lot recently. I'm working as a chaplain intern at a hospital in Atlanta this summer. I've spent a lot of time with people in despair about their own health, worried about the diagnosis of a loved one, terrified both to have hope or to let go of it. Even as there are some beautiful moments in this holy work, it gets so heavy. Sometimes I want to yell "that's enough!" Or whisper "enough."

Even though he doesn't say it that way, we see some signs of the weight of the world crashing on Elijah as well. "It is enough." Do you hear those voices in your head? "I can't take any more of it. I don't wish to feel this any more. I don't want to be afraid any more. I don't want this."

So it's in this shape that we find Elijah sitting under the tree, all by himself. When we feel weighed down, being alone with no one in sight has an extra sting. Is there a point in crying out "enough!" if we don't see anyone around to witness it?

For all of the imagery in this passage and immediately previous, in which Elijah is running for his life, eventually even leaving his servant behind, settling under a solitary broom tree, positions him as alone. However, there are also other types of despair. We witness Elijah's despair at his realization that even sitting under a tree by himself, he isn't free of comparison or expectation-- this is despair of not measuring up. He says, "I am no better than my ancestors." This one strikes me particularly hard. What does it mean when you feel like a failure not just for yourself, but for all of those who have gone before you as well? Every generation wants more for their children -- what happens when we feel like we can't measure up? When, for all of our efforts, we end up far away from where we hoped and planned to be? When we're giving all of the energy we have, without getting any in return? When we feel like we've failed despite everything we've done? Even though this story happens after one of Elijah's biggest victories, he is still in the despair of not measuring up.

Sitting in despair hurts. We may feel abandoned, lost, angry, hopeless, or that insidious pain of feeling nothing at all. We see Elijah skip eating a meal and going to sleep -- both things that happen in the physical dying process. Even if Elijah isn't physically dying, it sounds like his despair is leading him toward emotional death. This is something to be honored and held. Despair can be of both body and spirit. In both cases, we're reminded that we can't sustain ourselves on our own.

But for all of that, despair is active. It has motion within it. It is often triggered by something. There's a low rumbling within, of the recognition that something isn't right, that there's something else we need, something that's missing. Despair is restless. On some level, we feel and we know this is a liminal space, a transition point. A tipping point. Perhaps it leads to anger, to depression, to bad decisions.

But maybe it can give way to other things too--help us move to grief, connect with emotions we've been ignoring, or point us toward something we need. Maybe the restlessness of despair will lead to the cry out, the collapsing under a tree or on our beds.

(Janice and Matt turn cameras on and unmute)

Dialogue

Janice: Thank you, Erin, for authentically sharing your experience. As a culture, we tend to try to hide despair, to sweep it under the rug, put on a happy face, and say we're "fine". But I appreciate how you're really acknowledging the despair, sitting with it, and the need to honor

the nuances of the different types of despair. I'm also struck by your descriptions of despair as active, and restless, and noting the potential for despair to not be a permanent dead end, but to lead us somewhere. Tell me more about what you've witnessed.

Erin: Sure. There's a woman I've talked to a few times who has been in the hospital for several months. She told me about some of her hardest times in the ICU and how absolutely miserable she was and the spiritual struggles she went through. But she also told me that even there in the hospital, she could feel God protecting her. She has channeled the restlessness of despair into energy for her working really hard in physical therapy so she can go home soon. As she learned how to walk a few steps in the rehab unit, she found gratitude that God brought her through and was with her as she saw physical improvement, too.

Matt: Witnessing such moments must give you a bit of an uplift as well right?

Erin: They do and it gives me a little bit of fuel to dive back into the hard work.

Matt: Thanks for that powerful message and connection Erin, what an amazing and challenging roller coaster ride you must have every week!

(Erin and Janice turn cameras off and mute)

Matt: Depletion into Renewal

Everyday life, even outside of the emergency room experience that Erin described, is filled with challenges and loss, but the past year plus has seen the challenges brought to the forefront in trying to live our lives through all of the hard but necessary efforts being taken to be safe and combat the spread of the virus. And, as it has recently been referenced by others here at GCPC, we have also seen the losses within our own community increase... many times without getting the chance to say goodbye and grieve together in person. All of this has left many of us finding our tanks empty or nearly empty. This struggle and loss tends to pull away at our hope and has led many of us to the cry out moment that Elijah experienced.... myself included.

The lead up to this moment and the transition into renewal is where my focus was drawn when considering this passage for today. Elijah had just finished being an instrument of and witnessing a powerful, supernatural act of God in the previous chapter, when "the fire of the Lord fell" on the sacrificial altar, succeeding where the prophets of Baal could not. Yet when Jezebel, the queen of Israel who slew many prophets of the lord, threatened his life through a messenger, he feared and ran. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that if you feel your life is at risk that you shouldn't take action. Threats of violence can and should always be taken seriously. It's just that in this context, given what Elijah just witnessed, it seems to me that his fleeing may have come from both a weariness and perhaps also a lack of trust in God in that moment and THIS is what we are told preceded the moment of overwhelming despair that caused him to plop down under the broom tree..... Also, while solitude in the wilderness CAN be healing and restorative, particularly for an introvert, choosing this moment to leave his support community to be alone may not have helped the whole despair situation.

It was also pointed out to me by a dear friend and someone I consider a spiritual mentor on a recent walk, that through the act of sitting under the broom tree and praying....Elijah STOPPED. He ceased the act of fleeing and acknowledged his lack of control over the situation as the despair mounted to the point of being overwhelming. His cry and prayer reflected this deep despair and then he SLEPT. These acts, to me, are what created the space for his transition to replenishment and renewal.

I'm sure many of us have had moments in life where we try to take control of uncontrollable events on our own, ignoring the needs of our mind and body and not leaning into God and our loving community to help us. I know I have! Due to my spiritual journey and some of my own trust issues with God, I lived apart from my faith for much of my adult life. I can tell you from experience that despair and hopelessness were much more prevalent during these years. As someone who has also dealt with depression and anxiety throughout my life, in those days the lows felt so much lower. It was as if I knew something was missing and there were many moments of crying out for help to the universe... since I was unsure of a loving God at that point. But looking back now I can see many indicators, both internal and external, that show evidence of God reaching out... I just wasn't ready to trust yet. I would encourage us all to consider that God draws nearest to us when in these raw moments of despair at the literal end of our ropes.

This is why the principles of self care and compassion that Amy Kim, Vivian and George discussed earlier are as important to us as adults as it is for the kiddos. (Kiddos is a term of endearment by the way and yes I know I sound like an old man saying it.) Since I love nerding out on words that resonate, if you will indulge me, I want to quickly look at the definitions of Nourishment and Renewal. Nourishment as defined by Oxford Languages online is "the food or other substances necessary for growth, health, and good condition." Growth, health and good condition! Renewal, defined by the same resource, is "an instance of resuming an activity or state after an interruption." and a sub definition also includes "the replacing or repair of something that is worn out, run-down, or broken." Resuming and replacing what is broken! Powerful ideas in a simple definition. So when we find ourselves reaching this point...cry out, pray the hard prayers and know that God is listening to you and is WITH you. Open yourself to the transition into renewal. Then pay attention to what your body and mind need. Rest, eat, find community and nourish to start that renewal.

So we need to feed our physical bodies with food, but we should not neglect the feeding of our spirits and connection with the Divine to start the recharge and renewal process. So dear GCPC....how do we let our guard down? How do we let go of our desire to control before we get to despair? What can we do to clear and create space for God to make the Divine healing and nourishing presence known? Perhaps caring for oneself is not a selfish act, but something we are called to do to recharge and connect with the divine so we can best care for and serve one another!

(Janice and Erin turn cameras on and unmute)

Dialogue

Erin: Matt, thanks for trusting us enough to share so much with us. I completely agree: we have to find ways to recharge ourselves so we can be present for our communities and the world around us. But that can be so hard.

Janice: Those of us who are caring for others, especially, whether it be for our children, our parents, our partners, or in our professional lives, have had an extra load to carry throughout the pandemic. I know I've found it hard to find renewal when the caregiving needs never stop.

Matt: That is a very tough situation and these life events seem like something we can't handle on our own that really needs a Divine connection to feed and nourish us through such challenging times.

Janice: Yeah, I've really been thinking about this a lot lately.

(Erin and Matt turn cameras off and mute)

Janice: Depletion into Renewal

- When I see Elijah hitting his "enough" under that tree in that wilderness, so soon after the mountaintop moment of the defeat of the prophets of Baal, I can relate to his exhaustion.
 - Pandemic:
 - Seminary
 - Mother of three children
 - Tiring and hard trying to fit it all in:
 - help the kids with their school
 - served on the Covid committee of the school to implement safety policies
 - keep up with own seminary classes
 - provide a safe container to support my kids emotionally through frightening and unpredictable times (maintain any normalcy possible in highly abnormal times)
 - be at least somewhat present as a spouse, daughter, sister, and friend;
 - Ride all the waves of layoffs at Russell's work, and figure out how to adapt his work schedule to allow me to get my seminary work done, even when the kids were home
 - Russ and I both: participate faithfully in the life and ministry of the church, including participating in the hard and necessary work of recognizing and beginning to allow white supremacy culture within ourselves to be dismantled alongside our church family;

- Responding to the constant “new normals”, continual adjustments to new information and changing circumstances and additional responsibilities -- required:
 - agility, patience, and
 - copious amounts of self-restraint, tea, and dark chocolate. Some wine, too.
- I recognize that we are some of the very fortunate few who did ok through all this. (Housed, clothed, employed, insured, fed, wonderful teachers)
 - None of us were sick or hospitalized thus far; three of us were eligible for, and received vaccines
 - We missed our family, we missed being with our church family in person, we missed activities, being together with friends, missed routines, social networks, but had all the material necessities of life.
- **And still...I’m tired, y’all.**
 - The fear and uncertainty have been exhausting. All that cortisol constantly pumping through my veins for months; it takes its toll.
 - Trying to do it all--at the same time--has been exhausting
 - Rarely having quiet or time alone--it’s exhausting
 - Each family having to do everything for ourselves, instead of sharing care because children under 12 aren’t able to get a vaccine-it’s exhausting

- Elijah had been well provided for physically by God - there are three stories of him being miraculously fed:

- by ravens,
- by a widow with her last flour and oil, and
- by these cakes and water brought by a messenger of God.

And yet... even though he’s been provided for so profoundly by God, even though he’s had successes as far as measuring prophet success goes, he’s ready to give up. To die. His latest challenge - the queen coming after his head--it just feels like too much. The last straw.

I’d call that utter and **complete depletion**.

Practitioners of Eastern medicine might call it *adrenal fatigue*.

Although I haven’t been practicing professionally for a while, I still approach the world as a counselor. From my experience as a counselor, I know that when people live in a state of high alert and chronic stress for a long time, it has significant consequences. Back when I had clients, and even now with friends, I shared information to help validate people’s experiences and help

them understand that there are physiological, psychological, emotional, and yes, even spiritual response patterns that we see repeatedly with trauma, acute stress, grief, depression, anxiety, and more.

So, no, we're not crazy--many of us are experiencing intense but normal human reactions to abnormal situations--which have lasted far, far longer than originally expected. It stretches us beyond what we think we have left.

I think this is where Elijah is in our story; that overwhelm from constant intensity has him under the tree in the wilderness.

Elijah's bodily needs are being met again in this story--and those are important! This is not an either/or--it is a BOTH/AND:

- Think about our HALT acronym, and how being mindful of meeting our bodily and emotional needs can free us up to respond instead of react to the world around us, positively impacting our relationships
- The angel is there to equip Elijah for what is ahead: he needs to be physically fortified to head into the wilderness.
- AND, Elijah needs something *more* to help him: he needs to be fed spiritually to be able to emerge with renewed purpose. He needs a "why" to go on...

What is spiritual food, anyway?

After Elijah has his time in the wilderness, he will have the experience on Mount Horeb (AKA Mt. Sinai--remember, where Moses received the 10 Commandments?), of a direct encounter with the Holy One of Israel. Not in the mighty wind, or in the earthquake, or the fire, but ***in the Still, Small Voice***. Are you familiar with this story? After this encounter, Elijah will have a new direction and purpose to his ministry.

How do we access spiritual food?

I would argue that spiritual feeding is experienced in vertical and horizontal ways.

Vertical:

- Relationship with the Divine (in any person of the Trinity)
- Different ways to access:
 - Being in Creation
 - Creating or listening to music
 - Making or enjoying art
 - Build something with hands
 - Reading scripture
 - Prayer
 - Journaling conversations with God

- For me: walks in nature are how I access spiritual nourishment. I am most settled, whole, and responsive instead of reactive when I get to start my day with a walk in Creation. Rain or shine. **And I take pictures, so that during my hectic days I can remind myself of that time** [begin photo slideshow fullscreen]

- **see:** majestic trees, the way the light plays, the changing of the season, deer, red fox, hawks, rabbits, birds, cicadas, flowers, water, new growth-- immersed in visual metaphors
- **hear:** birdsong, the wind, raindrops on leaves and the ground, the animals moving through the woods, and my favorite: water flowing down the mountain streams over rocks.
- **smell:** the dew, new life, damp earth, flowers, moss,
- **taste:** wineberries in the summer, and smoke from fireplaces in the air in the winter
- **feel:** the brush of the wind on my cheek or through my hair, raindrops or the sun on my face, the crunch of gravel under my feet, the delicate touch of Queen Anne's lace, fiddleferns unfurling

I witness the great interconnectedness of life in the forest, and know that I am a part of it. I see the great care and intentionality around me, and know that God cares for me, too, just like the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field. I know that I'm not alone in Creation. I am replenished by the movement of the Spirit.

True, walking lets me burn off some of that cortisol that I've built up from daily stresses, and I sweat out toxins, but it's so much more: that stress is replaced with sensory calming, with belonging, and *a still small voice*, tending to me.

Where do you experience belonging? Accompaniment? [*Not stopping to see responses; NO you tube chat*]

How else might we be fed spiritually? In the Gospel passage for today, which Richard read for us, we hear Jesus describe himself as "the bread of life... come down from heaven". Jesus contrasts the spiritual food he's offering with the literal food--the manna--eaten by the ancestors in the desert. The physical food didn't give the ancestors eternal life. And remember, the physical food only got Elijah so far, too; his encounter with God fueled him in more lasting ways.

Of course, since we hear these words when we celebrate communion, I am always reminded of corporate communion when I hear these words of Jesus. And in this I see a horizontal way that we access spiritual food - in Christian community. Whether it happens outdoors in person, synchronously via Zoom, or in pre-pandemic corporate worship, the sacrament of communion nourishes us in ways that the molecules of the bread (or cracker, or donut, or macaron) and juice (or coffee, tea, or water)-- simply don't. Because we partake in a shared spirit, in love, with unity of purpose, we are fed by the Spirit moving among us--by Jesus Christ here whenever two or more are gathered in his name--in person or via Zoom and YouTube.

That's not all. We are fed spiritually horizontally when we work together: when we bring meals to one another when a loved one is sick, or when celebrating the birth of a baby, or when we drive one another to dialysis or chemotherapy. We are fed spiritually when we struggle **together** through a sermon series or book study that pushes us past the edges of our

discomfort into new compassion and freedom in mutual liberation. Alone, it is too much; yet, with the Spirit's power moving among us together, we can support one another into different ways of being. We are fed spiritually when we sweat together in the garden to produce healthy food to share with those who are hungry, when we meet to have coffee, or for Sunday school or a study, and really look at one another and listen after we ask, "how *are* you... REALLY?" We were never meant to do this alone.

We have our vertical access to spiritual nourishment: in creation, scripture, art, prayer, music, the movement of the Spirit in the world around us, and the still small voice. We have our horizontal access to spiritual nourishment: in Jesus Christ, bread from heaven, present each time we gather--even over the miles, in acts of service to one another and to our community, in the shared struggle for mutual liberation, and every time we share the love and mercy of God.

(Erin and Matt turn cameras on and unmute)

GCPC, I wish we were through this wilderness. But, it seems there may be more to come, with COVID and with other challenges.

We know you are tired,

Matt: We know you are hungry.

Erin: But don't give up in despair. Arise!

Matt: Eat!

Janice: For the journey will be too great for you without spiritual nourishment. Where will YOU seek to be fed?

(Thumbnail image)

Video: [Have Mercy on Me](#)

