

**When Giving Up Is Not an Option - Reflection on 1 Kings 19:4-8 and John 6: 35, 41-51  
August 8, 2021**

Last week, I began my sermon by asking everyone to think about the top three best moments in their lives. The general theme I presented was that we are more likely to remember events that include people, places, and experiences over material things. We talked about gratitude and remembering that God can provide for us even when things look challenging just as he gave the Israelites Manna (bread from heaven) in the wilderness.

Today, I want to ask a different question for you to ponder: has there ever been a time when you felt like giving up? When you were just done with it all, completely tired, and felt like there was no point to keep going? In short, have you ever reached a point in your life when you just felt finished?

Mental health is a topic that has gained a lot of traction in recent years, but can still be a taboo subject within the church. It is estimated that about a quarter (or one in four) adults in Canada have faced a mental health struggle at some point in their lives, and during the pandemic a survey was released showing that only 2% of Canadians actually felt mentally well. While not everyone was diagnosed with depression or anxiety as a result of the lockdowns, it is safe to say that the new way of living impacted lots of people negatively. Many people struggled with increased fear, isolation, and loneliness, and there were some individuals who did not know where to best access supports.

Personally, I am one of the 98% of Canadians who really struggled during the COVID season. There came a time a few months into the pandemic when I truly felt despair. I remember sitting on my bed having a Zoom call with my mentor as we read a book and studied together. My mentor only lived about five minutes away but due to her husband being elderly she was shielding and we couldn't meet. All of a sudden, she asked me what I thought about a certain paragraph we had just read, and I told her that I had no idea what we read even though I had read it out loud. My friend was very patient and told me that we would just take our time and go back to the paragraph to look it over again.

Suddenly, my eyes filled with tears and I hung up the call. My bewildered mentor called me back to see what was wrong, but I was not able to articulate myself and just continued crying. From that day on I was no longer OK. I exhibited many signs of significant depression and I thought there was no possible way I would be able to make it through this pandemic. I am glad that by God's grace and the love and support of friends and family I have not only made it through but in some respects have thrived during COVID, but I am reminded of many others who did not meet with the same results and are even now feeling the effects of a global tragedy.

In today's reading, we are met with a depressed servant of God named Elijah. Elijah had a very important role of telling the Israelites what God was saying and he was not always popular because of this. Lots of times he was highly respected, but there were also times when people didn't like him because he said things which were unpopular and challenged people in authority who felt that they had the right to do whatever they wanted. Before the text that we read today, Elijah was presented as self-assured, confident, and successful, yet in this moment we see a very different reality. Instead of a powerful man, we see a vulnerable one. Instead of someone who is courageously leading, we see someone filled with shame and guilt over his own perceived failures to the point that he begins to feel defeated, deflated, and depressed.

In today's passage, we meet Elijah right as he is fleeing for his life. Elijah has spoken up to Ahab (the evil King of Israel) and as a result Ahab and his wife Jezebel seek to kill Elijah by the sword. Elijah runs away in fear and hides in a cave. Suddenly Elijah no longer sees himself as a prophet, rather he sees himself as a weak man who couldn't do what he was asked by God to achieve. Elijah then sits down under a broom tree (also known as Juniper tree) and begs God to let him die because he is no better than any of his ancestors who also could not accomplish the task he has been entrusted with.

The fact that Elijah is sitting under a broom tree is likely because it was the most common tree found in the desert. It offered very little shade and perhaps showed a sign of resignation, that Elijah simply didn't have anymore fight left in him. Just like for so many of us, Elijah was his own worst enemy and saw himself in a more negative light than anyone else did.

The amazing thing is that even when Elijah was filled with despair, and perhaps even a bit of self-pity, God appears to him not once but twice. The first time that God appears he provides Elijah with some bread and water, which satisfies Elijah's physical needs for a short while. The second time God appears, he provides for Elijah's spiritual needs by speaking to him not in an earthquake or a fire, but rather in a still small voice which causes Elijah to cower in fear. In other words, God did not make a spectacular display for Elijah, but rather just gave Elijah what it is he directly needed. It's interesting to note as well that this is not the first time that God provided bread out of nowhere to Elijah, there was also a story just two chapters before where there was a drought in the land and ravens came down with bread to give to Elijah to keep his physical stamina up and as a result he was able to help others on his journey.

When I was in Saskatoon I spent quite a bit of time with some Indigenous friends. One of the things I learned was about the **Medicine Wheel**. This is a holistic model that sees us as whole people. It reminds us that we all basically have four aspects that need to be nurtured for our own health and wellness: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Thus our physical needs are very important.

I am sure that we have all been hungry at some point in our lives, and we know that when our physical needs aren't properly cared for it can impact our mental and emotional health. For example, have you ever been with someone who had not eaten for a while and they started getting angry and a bit snappy? There's actually a trendy phrase for this called "hangry." Or have you met someone who hasn't had a proper night's sleep in days and they aren't able to do their work to the best of their ability, perhaps making careless mistakes or being lethargic and lacking concentration? Physical health is so important in fact that when people are trying to recover from drug and alcohol addiction they are taught an acronym called HALT - in other words they need to watch out for times when they are Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired because these will be moments when they are more likely to give in to their old coping mechanisms.

What I love about this Bible story is that God first recognized Elijah's physical needs, provided him with food and rest, and then attended to his emotional and spiritual needs by giving him hope and letting him know that God was there. In fact, it wasn't long after this whole despondent episode that God provided for Elijah in another practical way, by giving him a helper. Elijah was able to mentor his new student, Elisha and this helped to take some of the pressure off of just one person.

In our own lives, we can face similar experiences. There are times when we work for social justice and passionately advocate for a certain cause, only to realize that others in society are not as excited about it as we are. This can make us feel like our work is in vain, and it can make us want to give up because we don't feel we are being met with the recognition, resources, or respect we think we deserve for it. It is in those moments that God shows up and provides us with the strength to keep going knowing that our directive is from Him and not from what society pressures us to become.

There are other times when we face a little blip in our journey and things don't go as we expect. Perhaps we face a physical health issue, a family matter, a delay in our education or career, or a mental health crisis which forces us to stop or post-phone our journey for a time. Just like Elijah, we can be reminded that this one event is not our whole story. That just because something isn't happening the way we want it to right now does not mean it will be that way forever.

Sometimes there are moments when we will feel like we are in the desert, physically and metaphorically, there will be times when we feel we have nothing left to give because we gave all that we could, but then God will strategically place people in our lives at just those exact moments. It has happened to me so many times and one of my former mentors used to tell me that these were "divine appointments." Moments like when you are going for a walk or going to the store and you're having a bad day only to stumble upon one of your friends, or moments when you are ready to throw the towel in and then you go to church or go to a group or workshop only to hear the exact words you needed to for that day. It's just incredible how God works at those times.

A few weeks ago, I introduced you to some of the writings from my friend Dr. Jacqueline Marie Maurice from Saskatoon who is an educator, writer, and health and wellness coach. Dr. Maurice has taught me a few more things since I got to know her which really relate to this topic as well. One of the things Dr. Maurice taught me was that when we are faced with a crisis we all have a decision to make: will I have a breakdown or a break-through?

Sometimes that is easier said than done. I have struggled with depression for the past 18 years and in that time there have been a few moments when I did have a break-down. However, the root message behind it is not shame but encouragement, because I learned that even in those moments when I did break-down, God used my past experiences to build others up. I have come to see that nothing is wasted in God's economy and today I have the privilege of sharing my story with others so that they know that they are not alone and that God loves them even when everything in their life feels bleak and hopeless. Part of the reason I share my story now is because I see that it benefits others and that God uses me to help give strength to those who feel all strength is gone.

Dr. Maurice also taught me this wonderful concept called "Healing the Healer." As someone who is in the helping professions herself and also trains and mentors students who are becoming helpers, Dr. Maurice taught me that in order for me to be the best in my role, I also must be looking after myself. I must practice self-care, know my own weaknesses, be self-aware to recognize when I am struggling, and have the strength to reach out and ask for help from my peers and colleagues so that I can continue supporting the patients and clients I saw at the hospital as a chaplain.

I believe this is invaluable advice because our society often pushes us to be busy and put other's needs before our own. Growing up Christian, I was always taught that others were

more important than me and that God wants me to serve others and give to them. This is true, but what is equally true is that if I am running on empty, I will not be as productive in my role. If I am able to fill up on spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation, have meaningful conversations with friends and family, take time to go for walks, and make sure my physical needs are met then I become a happier person, less stressed and more pleasant to be around. In Dr. Maurice's own words, it is important to "honour and invest in your mind, body, spirit and emotions every day, create and embrace balance, and honour the riches deep within our heart, soul, and being so that we can keep going and enrich the lives of others."

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Eugene Peterson also sums up this notion of resting in Christ perfectly. In Matthew 11:28-30 of the Message Paraphrase he writes, "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

In the The Passion translation it reads like this "Are you weary, carrying a heavy burden? Come to me. I will refresh your life, for I am your oasis. Simply join your life with mine. Learn my ways and you'll discover that I'm gentle, humble, easy to please. You will find refreshment and rest in me. For all that I require of you will be pleasant, and easy to bear."

However, even though both these translations word things a little differently, the main theme remains the same in them. When we are burnt-out and feel we cannot go on any further, Christ is offering us rest. Last week we talked about how sometimes it is difficult to just accept something without having to work for it, and here Christ is offering us that gift again and reminding us that all we need to do is receive his freedom and love, we don't need to apply more pressure on ourselves to earn his grace.

Yes, there will be moments in our lives when a negative situation will be all consuming, but through faith and trust in God, the situation can be lessened and we can begin to see that it is just one small part of who we are. Just like God provided Manna for the Israelites in the desert, and just like God provided Elijah with shade, bread, water, and a nap, God is also providing for us each moment and in every trial that we face. As we end our reflection time together, I want to share something that Rev. Jim Tenford from St. Andrew's United Church Moose Jaw recently shared on Facebook to a group I am part of called "Below Average Ministers in the UCC" (we are called Below Average because we are all under the average age of 56 for paid accountable ministry personnel he writes: "Reading over this week's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings I was thinking that 'Broom Tree United Church' would be a great name for a congregation. It's a place to listen to God, have a rest, and eat some cake!" I pray that as a church and as individuals we will be able to offer this same service to others - to listen to them, pray with them, offer them hospitality, and help them to grow in their full potential. May it be so. Amen.