

## Learning to Exhale

I Kings 19:1-14

Third Sunday after Pentecost, (June 30) 2019

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I recently read a story about the *haenyeo* -- female divers who have been harvesting seafood off the coast of Korea since at least the 17th century, who know the importance of exhaling before inhaling.

The *haenyeo* are all-female diving collectives on remote Korean Jeju Island, south of the mainland. In this culture, while the men stay home to care for the children, the women spend their days diving. Sometimes sixty to seventy feet under the icy ocean waters, they hold their breath for several minutes at a time while searching for abalone, conch or octopus.

When the divers finally emerge for air, they first exhale, each emitting a distinctive cry, or *sumbisori* -- a high-pitched, rhythmic whistle to expel carbon dioxide from the lungs. A deep intake of breath follows.

The chief diver of a collective listens for each *sumbisori* as the women -- grandmothers, mothers and young teens -- pop up all around the diving area. The chief knows each diver's sound and waits anxiously for the full complement of *sumbisori* to confirm that every diver is safe and rested before resubmerging. In concert, the exhalations make a kind of music, a song of safety, life and rest. Everyone exhales first to expel the carbon dioxide in her system before inhaling to go back down (from Gretchen Ziegenhals, "Singing the Life-Giving Song of Exhalation," *Faith and Leadership*, June 25, 2019, [faithandleadership.com](http://faithandleadership.com)).

Exhaling for rest and renewal. Inhaling for work.

Today's story of the prophet Elijah is about a man who spends his life inhaling for work, tightening his belt, girding his loins, gathering his courage and his stamina as he works, serves, helps, resists, organizes, preaches, makes a difference for God. He's always inhaling because there is so much to do.

Elijah was overwhelmed, exhausted, anxious, angry, and full of fear. He was depressed. He wasn't depressed because he was weak or because he had failed. In fact, in the previous chapter of I Kings 18, Elijah had succeeded dramatically. In the previous story, on Mt. Carmel, Elijah went head-to-head with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and their religious chaplains, and the Lord God Yahweh took on the god Baal. Baal and the false prophets were completely routed and Ahab and Jezebel confronted with their idolatry and falsehood. King Ahab was a hollow man but Queen Jezebel was determined and smart. In response to Elijah showing them up, she sent word directly to Elijah, "I'm telling you up front I'm coming for you. I already have you under surveillance. We're tracking your cell phone, listening to every word you say and tracking every move you make. We know where you live. We will get you."

So Elijah took off on the run. He ran as fast as he could from Mt. Carmel, way up north, all of the way down south to Beersheba, which is about as far away as one could get from Jezebel. He was afraid and he was exhausted. He wasn't tired from running; he was exhausted from anxiety and fear. He couldn't sleep from keeping one eye open, worrying and fretting in the middle of the night. Nothing will wear you down like anxiety and fear.

Elijah was angry, too. Just the other day he had won; Yahweh had won. He thought it was over and done; the movie ended and the credits rolled. But the Ahab and Jezebels of the world have a way of re-inventing themselves and showing up again and again. As Tolkien said, “The shadow always returns.” Elijah is angry that Jezebel didn’t stay defeated, and very likely he’s mad that God didn’t finish the job and destroy Ahab and Jezebel.

Elijah is depressed not because he was a failure or because he was weak. Sometimes depression comes when the systems we’re in and which we care about are sick. This is what happens when otherwise healthy and strong people are put in sick institutions, sick families, sick circumstances, in a sick world. Walker Percy said, “[Is] the Self . . . Depressed because there is something wrong with it or [is] Depression a Normal Response to a Deranged World?” (*Lost in the Cosmos*, p. 73). In other words, the world is depressing! If we’re not depressed something is wrong with us! When we care about things that matter, then we are a walking-talking candidate for Depression.

Elijah loved his people but his people were sick. His people were addicted to glitzy, cheap, feel-good religion which provided the religious justification for exploitative economics where people and the land were used for profit; where the poor were ground down and the rich lifted up. These profits helped Jezebel and Ahab have a well-paid paramilitary police force that made sure everyone stayed in line. Meanwhile, their religion was constantly reminding, with wonderfully inspiring worship, that all of it was God’s will.

So Elijah runs and runs. Finally, he sits down under the only shade he can find, a little broom tree, and cries to God that he may die. He says, “It is enough,

Lord.” Which in the Hebrew means, “How long, O Lord, how long?” He doesn’t want Jezebel to kill him but he wants to die. Yet Elijah still remembers how to pray. He is utterly honest and pours out everything to God. In God’s presence, out beyond the reach of Jezebel, Elijah exhales. He lets it all out in prayer, an exhalation before God.

Then he lies down and sleeps. Is there a connection between pouring out his heart and his fears to God in prayer and his ability to rest? I think so.

One of the first things we need when we’re worn out from worrying and in despair is to trust God enough to be able to rest. To sleep means that you trust that God can handle things while you go off-line. It is a mini-sabbath. A time when you let go and let God. In Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* there is a great pause in the story here. The choir breaks in to sing from Psalm 121: “Thy Keeper will never slumber. He watching over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps.” When the eyes of God never close; we can close our eyes and sleep.

We can also eat. Elijah wakes up and discovers that the angel of God feeds him pancakes and cool fresh water. Back in chapter 17 when God first called Elijah, God sent him out into the wilderness to detox from the food and dependency on the sick system, the king’s exploitative economy, and learn to depend on God to feed him. Back then he was fed by ravens and drank from a brook. This time, Elijah finds himself back in the hands of an angel, partaking of God’s sustenance, and depending on God’s grace. What are ways we’re dependent, addicted to Ahab and Jezebel ways and economy? What ways do we benefit from an economy that exploits people and is destroying the climate?

Elijah rests some more and the angel wakes him a second time. “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” “Journey?” says Elijah, “Where am I going now?”

But this time, there is a difference. Before Elijah came here to escape something. Now the angel of God calls him to leave here to meet something. You were driven. Now be drawn. You were a fugitive. Now be a pilgrim. Go to God.

So Elijah gets up and journeys forty days and forty nights to the holiest place on earth that he knows about; to the one place he believes where God will be. Here the story says he went to Mt. Horeb; elsewhere in the Bible it is called Mt. Sinai. Do you remember Sinai? Horeb or Sinai, it is the same mountain on which God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and made a covenant with the People of God. Elijah returns to the place where he knew that God was most assuredly present. Whether he is depressed or in despair, Elijah is very wise. He knows how to talk to God; he knows how to detox from addiction, and he knows to return to where God has been known before.

He gets up on the mountain and finds a good, dark, and safe, cave into which he crawls and sleeps though the night. This cave, sort of a womb with a view, is a place where Jezebel can’t find him and where he is in God’s presence. The next morning God speaks. But instead of an answer or some sort of reassurance, God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Let me ask you something. When you find yourself in dire straits, hanging on by your fingernails, where would you go to find holy ground? Where would you go, what would you do to find God again? What would be your cave? What if you

opened your old Bible again and began to read? What if you found a place of retreat? What if you returned to worship again?

And God asks, “What are you doing here?” Are you here looking for inspirational feeling? Do you want a quick fix? What are you doing here?

As I’ve said, Elijah knows how to pray, even if his prayer is a pouring out of his own fears and anger, and seeking pity. Elijah says, “God, everyone and everything is going to hell in a hand basket. No one but me keeps your covenant anymore. No one but me is faithful. No one but me stands by you. Not only is everyone else unfaithful to you; they are trying to kill me too.” Elijah pours it out. Pours out the poison; pours out the secrets to God. He exhales all of the toxins.

God says, “Go stand at the mouth of the cave.” And Elijah does so. In no time, he has to hold on and shelter his face because the wind blows, the earth shakes, and then there is blazing fire! – just like when Moses was up here all of those years ago. But Elijah realizes God is not present in the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire. C. S. Lewis said that the one prayer God is likely never to answer is the prayer that says, “Encore!” (*Letters to Malcom*, p. 27).

After the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire, then there was sheer silence. The King James Version said there was a still, small voice, but it is best translated as silence. Nothing. No noise. The wind dies down; nothing. And Elijah listens. He lives into, steps into the silence; allows his heart rate to slow down, his breathing slows; he relaxes, and he listens. He breathes a long exhale. He becomes quiet.

Silence is so hard for many of us. We’re not patient enough. We want

something to occupy our minds. The television is always on or we immediately go to our cell-phones. Brain research shows that our brain develops in ways where we crave constant stimulation and distraction. But brain research also shows that the brain's elasticity or resilience is such that it can also rewire itself with discipline and help and encouragement and lots of practice of becoming silent and still.

Another thing. This is not passivity. Martin Luther King said that when people, usually white liberals, said "be patient" and "wait" they almost always meant "never." I am not advocating do-nothingness in the face of enormous challenges and the darkness in front of us. I'm saying, that in order for us to face the challenges and the darkness, we must learn how to be patient in the silence and wait on God. It's what theologian Dorothee Solle called "revolutionary patience."

Elijah was able to be quiet. To listen. Back in Exodus 19 God came to Moses at this very same place in whirlwind and fire and in an earthquake. This time, God comes in silence. God does not always come to us as we expect. And God comes in new ways. It's the old tradition but God's newness, all at the same time.

And God said a second time, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And Elijah answers with the same complaints he had before, but perhaps this time it is not whining, and frantic fear. This time, it is genuine lament to God. "God, what is going on? We don't seem to be making any progress. In fact, God, we seem to be regressing. And I feel so alone. I'm overwhelmed. I'm afraid. I'm tired and I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

God listens to Elijah and then God gives him some challenging words. They

are words of enormous risk and great danger. Elijah, who came seeking safety; learns revolutionary patience and then is sent out on risky, subversive mission. The one who came in his own depression and despair is called forth to the vision and mission of God.

God tells him to anoint someone else as king – in other words, the days of Ahab and Jezebel are numbered. Furthermore, you need to get some help, so go call Elisha to be your prophet-in-training in order to take over for you eventually. And God tells him one more thing: “Hey, and by the way, you’re not the only faithful one. There are 7,000 who have not bent their knee to Baal.” Now go back to them. Get out of yourself and join the God Movement, Elijah, and quit trying to “Lone Ranger” it.

God gives him a purpose bigger than him and God calls him back to community.

This past week I saw a Facebook post by our former member Jack Pennington, who now lives in Dallas. Jack is gay and has been happily married for the past twenty years to his husband Mark Carter. The context of his Facebook post was the PBS program “The Committee Documentary” about Florida and discrimination of LGBTQ folks years ago. Jack reflected back on those days and how alone and isolated he felt. He said, “I recall praying, asking God to make me different. I recall deciding to end my life... for I thought myself alone in this. Our own Barbara Cordell responded to Jack on Facebook saying, “I’m glad you’re still here!! And knowing that you’re not alone.” And Jack wrote back, “That was before I discovered Austin Heights Baptist Church and wonderful people like Dr. Barbara Cordell and realized life was not “fire and brimstone” but love, hope, and

compassion... we all accomplished great things together. As the Rev. Kyle Childress says, ‘take hold of each other’s hands and hold on tight, because we’re going to need each other this week.’”

Jack discovered like Elijah, we’re not alone. We’re in God and God has given us each other. So we hold on tight.

Austin Heights Baptist Church – we are small church in the middle of angry religion, mean politics, and a whole lot of fear. We feel as if we’re in retreat. We’re outnumbered and it is easy to feel overwhelmed and forget why we’re here. It is easy to withdraw and focus only on ourselves. And it is easy to work ourselves to frantic death. But we wait on God so we can be restored by God and directed by God to join God’s Movement, the Movement seen most clearly in Jesus.

To do this work takes a rhythm of exhaling and inhaling. Sabbath exhaling and weekday inhaling. Sabbath rest and weekday work. Sabbath day of saying “No” and weekdays of saying “Yes.” Can you learn to do that?

And remember, God has never needed a crowd. God calls and needs only a few who will devote their lives to him. Are you listening? In the silence, can you hear God?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.