

1 Kings 19:4-8 Pentecost 11 8/5/21 Pastor Bill Uetricht

It's quite popular in portions of American Christianity for preachers to preach on topics, like fatherhood, guilt, marriage, or some social or political issue. That's not been my style. I tend to think that the Biblical word is not primarily topical. It generally doesn't have that much to say, if anything, about individual topics like abortion or motherhood. And besides, while topics appeal to our desire to have the world broken up into easily digestible pieces, the Biblical word tends to be more complex. What it has to say can be applied not to just one topic, but to many. Moreover, sometimes the "living word," as the Bible is often called, requires hard work on our part to discover how it addresses us personally--our fathering, our psychological issues, our guilt, the political problems of our time. Following Jesus isn't an easy-to-use prescription for all our maladies or concerns. It is a deep struggle that often evades uncomplicated answers.

Having said all of that, I, nonetheless, today am going to become a bit topical. I'll stay wedded to the Biblical text, but the topic of depression just screams at me as I struggle with today's reading from First Kings. This marvelous little story about Elijah got me thinking about the way depression works and how it is addressed.

We are talking more about depression these days, and often for our benefit. But still, many of us find it hard to admit to this reality. When you live in a culture that makes little room for what many of us would call negative feelings, it's hard to admit that you aren't always feeling peppy, aren't always sitting on the top of the world. But the blues are normal. Why do you think so many people sing them? There is a sadness that just comes with living. Douglas John Hall speaks of "ontic melancholy," the melancholy, perhaps the sadness, that just comes with being. Sometimes life just makes you sad. Depression, therefore, is not unusual.

Yes, most of us recognize that depression can be a serious disease. It can be crippling for some. There are many depression disorders that beg for professional help, psychological and pharmaceutical treatment. And those who have such disorders ought to know that seeking help for them is not a matter of shame, but a sign of personal strength. Life sometimes is bigger than our own efforts and will benefit from outside resources.

Much depression, though, is situational. It visits us because of situations, what life gives us. I suspect that this is what Elijah is experiencing in First Kings. He's just had a battle with the 450 prophets of the foreign god Baal. And he's won the battle. Our God (Yahweh) is bigger and better than your god, he has proven. Well, Jezebel, the king's wife, who has instituted Baal worship on a national scale, is not overly enthralled with Elijah's actions. She's furious, actually. She is after Elijah, wanting to kill him. Elijah then runs away.

The Bible tells us that Elijah "went a day's journey into the wilderness." We're back into the wilderness again, aren't we? It's where life often takes us. Life can be mean sometimes. The desert isn't always where we want to go, but it's where we end up.

Notice what Elijah does when he gets into the wilderness. He sits underneath a solitary broom tree. Life's challenges and struggles often lead us to solitariness and they lead us to pray as Elijah prays. "Take my life." No, not "take my life that I might be, consecrated Lord to thee," but, "take my life, so that I might die." Depression can often lead to despair, thoughts of death. It would just be easier to be dead.

Depression and suicide are often linked, although there is some evidence that people more often commit suicide when they are just going into depression or coming out of it, not when they are lost in its ugliness. Depression can lead to such listlessness that people, when

they are in its depths, don't have the energy to carry out suicide. But nonetheless, depression can make death look appealing.

It certainly makes sleep appealing. "Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep." And in the story, it looks like he falls asleep twice. Getting away from it all, not having to consciously face what you have to face is the temptation when you are depressed. Hours and hours of sleep are so common for depressed people. We shouldn't be surprised when we or others withdraw. Life is hard. The pandemic has been hard. Withdrawal has been common for many folks during this time. For some who were on the edge of withdrawal before the pandemic, Covid 19 has given them permission to fully withdraw. Withdrawal is not foreign to human experience. Even the great, heroic figure Elijah wants to sleep it all off.

Yet in the midst of the sleep, a representative of the divine, an angel of the Lord shows up and awakens Elijah, saying "Get up and eat." After Elijah's second nap, the angel says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Now in some ways these words seem a bit harsh. You'd think that perhaps he could have said to Elijah, "Tell me about what is going on. Let's talk our way through this."

Not trying to downplay the significance of talk therapy—I'm involved in all the time—but sometimes talk is not the best antidote for our problems, especially when those problems involve depression. Some schools of thought these days suggest that when people are in deep depression, talk, particularly talk about feelings, is not the most helpful. "Ya, I'm feeling really bad," which perhaps makes me feel even worse. Sometimes in life we can't talk or feel our way out of our predicaments. We must *act* our way out of them. We must "get up and eat." It's the wisdom of the pilgrimage, by the way. You just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other. It's the wisdom of the

disciplines of the church. You may not *feel* it, but you *do* it. You show up. You give. You forgive. You don't wait until your feelings are ready. You act.

What our text tells us is that after Elijah was told to get up and eat, he got up and ate, and "there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water." Now that may not sound overwhelming, and it isn't, but the point is that there is provision for Elijah as he faces what he must face. Withdrawal is tempting, and we shouldn't be surprised by our going down the withdrawal path, but true health will come as we get up and eat.

Now you need to know that in what follows our text for today Elijah gets up and walks for forty days and nights in the strength of the food he was given. But after the forty days, he withdraws again to a cave. The struggle is constant. Sometimes we would just like to go back to bed. But note what the word of the Lord is to Elijah in the cave: "What are you doing here?" Our withdrawal behaviors are normal, but God beckons us into the future. Hiding out in the cave is not where we ultimately belong.

Now I don't say this with any sense that depression is easy, that it can be effortlessly eliminated. Life is too tough for that. But I do know that the word of the Lord is at work calling us out of our caves, inviting us into full engagement with life and people. What we discover in that engagement is indeed bread for the journey.

Jesus in John today says that he is the bread of life, that those who come to him will never be hungry, will never thirst again. The point is that there is provision, sustenance for life, life that is full. Life is not meant to be simply an experience of sadness. Life is not meant to be an invitation into despair. Suicide is not the only, the right, or the necessary choice. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever."

“Live forever” is not simply an invitation to go to heaven when you die. To live forever is to always have life that is full and abundant. It is to be awakened every day to food and drink right next to your mouth. If you stay asleep, if you remain in the cave, you will miss out on the abundant life that is God’s gift for you. So, I say to you, and you will probably need to say to me along the way, “Get up and eat!” The food really is quite good, and the journey is worth taking.