**Rev. Melissa J. Claxton
January 15, 2023
1 Kings 19, Matthew 11:28-30**

Today, we are starting a series about self-care called *Dead Man Walking* where we are going to focus on self-care because self-care is important and it’s biblical. The series is going to focus on a prophet named Elijah as we explore how Elijah went from a *Dead Man Walking*¸ just ready to give up, to a renewed spirit and how we can too...how we can find new life.

Some of you might be thinking *“Hey, I’m fine,”* and you might be. But I can guarantee you that there is someone in your life who is struggling...a child, a grandchild, a friend, a neighbor. In the United States, we are in a mental health crisis. People are struggling, and maybe what God has for you in this moment is how you can offer hope to someone else right now. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** Our series is going to center on the life of a prophet named Elijah, and how he went from this dead man walking to one with a renewed spirit. In particular, we are going to focus on 1 Kings 19. I encourage you to take time this week to go back and read the chapters leading up to this. If you have never read 1 Kings or it’s been a long time...here’s the reader’s digest version of the story.

After the people left Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 or so years, finally settling in the Promised Land. It wasn’t long before they started to grumble. They wanted a king. They wanted to be ruled like other nations, even though God warned against it. God finally gave them what they asked for – a king named Saul. Didn’t turn out that great. King David came next. Made mistakes but was a good king, faithful to God. Then King Solomon...started out as this really good king, but then he lost his way. Each of these kings served about 40 years.

Upon Solomon’s death, Jeroboam, a servant who had been in exile, came back and led a rebellion that led to a civil war that led to Israel being split into two...Israel and Judah. Jeroboam became the king of Israel. The first thing he did was reject God’s promises and abolish the worship of God. They began to worship the golden calf. At that point, Jeroboam became the prototype of an “evil” king and the next 15 kings would be described as doing *“evil in the sight of the Lord*” like Jeroboam.

In our passage today, it’s 60 or so years since the rebellion. Ahab is on the throne. He’s the 7th king since the split. Ahab is married to Jezebel, the one responsible for leading the people in worshiping yet another god, Baal. God had called Elijah as a prophet. I want to remind you that a prophet’s job was not to predict the future. It wasn’t psychic hotline. His job was to proclaim a truth, particularly when a nation and it’s leader is on the wrong path. A prophet’s job was to point that out in hopes that they change direction. They get back on track.

So, here we have this country that has spent the better part of six decades in political chaos. On top of that, there was a three year drought that led to a famine (a pandemic). So, Elijah has been through that. And if that wasn’t enough for poor Elijah, he had a show down with the prophets of Baal. He won but now Jezebel is out to kill him. The man’s at the end of his rope. He’s tired of running. He’s tired of the chaos. He’s tired of the conflict. He’s tired of sharing this message that just doesn’t seem to be doing any good. Things aren’t changing.

***Brian McLaren calls the Bible the story we find ourselves in***. I love that. It’s the story we can find ourselves in. God may not have called us to go head to head with our political leaders, but there’s so much of Elijah’s story that we’ve experienced today. A decade or more of political chaos that has tore families apart, forever destroying relationships. Three years of Covid. I had it in November. I thought, *“Man, the one good thing is I should be good for six months.”* I should be safe. Then, we were hit with another episode that doesn’t care that I just got over it. On top of all of that, life continues to happen...illness, loss, work, home...all of it. ***Elijah’s story is our story.***

***How is it with your soul?*** That’s a question that John Wesley would ask the members of his house churches. How is it with your soul? The interpretation to that is ***How are you really doing?*** Not what you’re going to tell people when they ask, but how are you really doing? And have you taken time to think of those around you. How are they really doing? The reality is that in the United States right now, we are in a mental health crisis. You might be doing well, but someone around you is struggling. *How is it with your soul?*

**Elijah wasn’t doing well.** Our passage tells us that he went out into the wilderness and crawled under an umbrella tree. He wanted to die. I think the image of that passage is important. In Israel, the wilderness is this barren land full of rocks and not a whole lot of vegetation, and I can’t help but think that’s how Elijah was feeling inside at that moment. He left his friends and he went off by himself and hid under an umbrella tree. He wanted to die...then he took a nap.

**Self-care is biblical.** Our story begins with self-care. The very first passage in scripture is this poem written about creation. The author wants us to know that in the beginning God created. God spoke and creation happened. God spoke and there was light. God spoke and there was sky and earth. God spoke and there were plants and trees and flowers...birds in the air, fish in the sea, and animals all around. God spoke and humanity was created. And then, God rested.

I grew up learning that God was always on duty...24/7. Yet, here we have this passage that talked about resting...not because God needed it, but because God knew we needed it. We need rest. We need Sabbath...not only for our bodies, but for our minds and our spirits. Sabbath was a huge part of the Israelite culture. They knew that they needed that time for self-care.

Jesus also talked about this. In Mark’s gospel, there is a story where Jesus and his disciples were walking through the grainfields and his disciples began picking some grain. The religious leaders saw this an got angry because it was considered work. I love what Jesus said. He reminded them that *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”* The Sabbath was created so that we could take time to rest and renew.

Jesus practiced this over and over. He led by example. After the feeding of the five thousand it says*, “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. Matt. 14:22-23* He was always doing that. He even took naps on boats.

**Sabbath rest is important.** Making sure that we take time to rest and renew is important, not only for our physical health, but for our mental and spiritual health as well. The reality is that the world is not going to stop if we do. It’s not going to come to an end.

***I learned that the hard way.*** This past year, I have had people tell me that they are concerned for me. For the most part, I do take sabbath time. Sometimes things get overwhelming. Sometimes I have to be reminded, but for the most part, I do make time for Sabbath because I hit that wall that Elijah hit. I’ve been where Elijah was.

For me, it had been during a particularly chaotic time in ministry. I was in a small town and had just walked through this wave of funerals. In small towns, they don’t have a huge pool of pastors to choose from and if you’re any good, your speed-dial. I was on speed dial. It didn’t help that the other pastor was focused on converting everyone or that I had been part of that community for decades and the non-churched folks considered me their pastor.

This particular time, I had had four or five funerals within a matter of weeks. This particular week, I was leaving on Wednesday morning for a retreat in Lansing. Tuesday night I realize I didn’t have anything done on Sunday’s sermon. I took solace in the fact that I would be home Friday afternoon and would have Friday afternoon and all day Saturday. I go to my retreat. On Thursday morning, my phone rings. It’s the funeral director Carl...and I know that there is only one reason Carl is calling me. The person they had planned backed out and they had no one. Funeral is Saturday. My plans changed. I would be meeting with the family on Friday afternoon and spend that night preparing for the service, but it was going to be okay because I had Saturday afternoon, right?

When I sat down to my computer on Saturday afternoon, Bible open, surrounded by books, nothing happened. I sat there staring at my computer. My brain was shut down. I was physically and emotionally and spiritually exhausted. I realized I wasn’t going to have a sermon for the next morning. Honestly, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I was hoping that there would be grace in that place, but the one thing that I did know was that for the rest of the day, I needed to take care of me. So, I put everything away and spent the rest of the day doing selfcare.

It's one of those moments when I learned not only how awesome God is, but how important self-care is. Five o’clock the next morning, I woke up and a sermon came to me. It might not have been the best sermon I ever gave, but it wasn’t my worst.

**Self-care is vital to our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.** Yet, we live in a world that tells us that we need to keep going, that we need to keep busy, that we need to always be doing something. We need to be productive and if we’re not, we are wasting time. We live in a world that is going 100 mph, nonstop, 24/7. **I’m here to tell you...doing nothing is nothing to be ashamed of because doing nothing is doing something when it is renewing our bodies and our minds and our spirits.**

***How are you taking care of yourself?*** What is that thing that helps you rest and renew because it’s different for each of us? So, what does your Sabbath look like?

For me, I like doing creative things...crafts, pottery, sewing. I also like to build stuff. Last year, when I was going on vacation, someone asked what I was going to be doing. I was going to go spend some time at our treehouse, and I was planning on working on the bathhouse we were building. I was told that’s not relaxing. It is for me. I love to build stuff. It’s not what I do every day. If it were, it wouldn’t be relaxing. It would be work. But I don’t. It’s something different that I enjoy and relaxes my mind and my spirit.

This week, my hope is that you will take time to read Elijah’s story and reflect on how it is with your soul. ***How are you really doing with all life has thrown at you.***

***How are you choosing to rest?*** Elijah went out into the wilderness and took a nap under an umbrella tree. Jesus went off into a desolate place to get away from the crowds and spent time in prayer. Both of them were getting away from the chaos that was surrounding them. I believe the question might be bigger than how are you choosing to rest. **It might be what do you need to rest from?** Maybe we need to be intentional about turning off the news and logging out of Facebook. This is not to bury our heads in the sand about what’s going on around us, but maybe what our spirits really need is space away from it.

***Are you taking time to rest? What does Sabbath look like for you?*** I believe it’s different for each and every one of us. But taking time to rest from the stress of the world is vital to the health of our soul. Jesus said: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.****29****Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”* ***Learn from me.*** What did Jesus do? He took time to rest. Jesus took time to step away from the chaos. Take time to rest this week. Let us pray.