**Rev. Melissa J. Claxton
Dead Man Walking: Elijah took care of his body
1 Kings 19:5-8, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20**

*Dead Man Walking...*The story of how the prophet Elijah went from burned out to renewal. I don’t think that we talk enough about selfcare. Not just as a church, but as a society. We’re always being told to push through, to pull our boots up by the straps and keep going. Elijah is a great biblical example of the importance of self-care. Without it, we find ourselves in a place of burn out just like Elijah.

Again, as I said last week, some of you may be thinking “I’m really in a good place. This doesn’t apply to me.” Great! I’m glad that you are, but there are folks in your life who are struggling. I can guarantee that. And you may be called to be the prophetic voice that they need to hear. This is also a reminder of the importance of selfcare in your life so you don’t get in that place of burn out. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** We started this series last week with the Reader’s Digest version of what got Elijah to the point of burnout in the first place. I encourage you to go back and read about it starting at about 1 Kings 12 after Solomon died on through chapter 19, where we’re focused on right now.

We don’t just arrive at burnout. It takes time and self-neglect. For Elijah, it was 60 years of political unrest he had spent his whole life in, a three-year drought that just came to an end, and this ongoing conflict with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who wanted to kill him. Elijah has been neck-deep in all of this in a season where he hadn’t been intentional about self-care, because self-care is intentional work.

The first step for Elijah in his journey to renewal was to take time off. He got away. Elijah went off into the desert. He got away from Ahab. He got away from Jezebel. He got away from the conflict that was threatening his life...the prophets of Baal. He took time off, went out into the desert where he could be by himself and separate from all of the chaos that had surrounded him for so long, and he rested.

**I want to remind you that this is bigger than simply taking a nap.**  What Elijah did was to step away from all the things that had been causing the stress in the first place just as Jesus did when he went up the mountain or to the garden to be by himself and pray. He stepped away from the chaos and the things that were constantly competing for his attention. We need to be willing to step away from the things that cause us stress. That’s really what Sabbath rest is about. It’s not about sleeping all day. Sabbath is about being intentional about stepping away from the taxing parts of life and making room for physical, emotional, and spiritual rest and renewal. And, as I said last week, that may look different for each of us. It might be reading a book, going for a hike, having a cookout with neighbors and friends, or a plethora of other things. That’s the first thing Elijah did. He stepped away.

**The next step for Elijah was that he took care of his body.** He’s out there in the wilderness, extremely exhausted, ready to give up on life, taking a nap under that bush or tree on the desert floor, when we are told that an angel appeared. We don’t know who the angel was...whether it was a celestial being or a human being. In the Bible, angels often appeared as human. God uses people to be angels in other people’s lives all the time. So, it could have been someone that was passing by who saw Elijah under the bush and saw that this guy was in crisis. Or maybe it was a celestial being. Whoever it was, while Elijah was sleeping, he started a fire, baked some bread, and drew some water. And when Elijah woke up, this angel told him to get up and eat...there’s bread and water...eat. Elijah got up and ate. Then, we’re told that he laid back down and went back to sleep, and after he rested for a while longer, he woke up again and the angel said, “hey...get up and eat.”

***First, I want to point out what the angel didn’t do, because I think this is important for us.*** The angel didn’t shake him awake and say, “what in the world are you doing laying here feeling sorry for yourself? Get your butt up. You’ve got work to do.” The angel didn’t say that. The angel didn’t chastise him for not having enough faith or for not drawing his strength from God. *I’ve heard that one recently...several times in fact.* There was no sermon preached in that moment. He wasn’t told that he needed to pray harder, read scripture more, or to make sure he went to church every week...buck up and put a smile on your face, think positive, get moving, quite feeling sorry for yourself, God’s got this.

These are things we sometimes hear and maybe even say when people around us are really struggling, particularly when they are people of faith as if people of faith should never struggle with what’s going on in their life. I think it’s because it’s easier to say something like, “You just have to have enough faith! God’s going to give you the strength to go forward. Make sure you read your Bible and spend time in prayer and I’ll pray for you.” then it is to sit with someone who’s struggling, bake them a loaf of bread (whatever that may look like), be that calming presence in their life, and gently remind them that they need to take care of themselves...maybe even give them permission, encourage them to take care of themselves. That’s what the angel did.

I recently read an article about clergy burnout. Hundreds of Protestant clergy men and women leave ministry every month because they’re burned out, and that number rose exponentially during Covid. They left because they are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. A lot of them even left the church (not the faith...the church.) These are people who pray and read scripture and faithfully depend on God, but they are burned out. I found one of the comments to the article to be really interesting. One person said that if they were really chosen by God, they wouldn’t burn out because they would have gotten their strength from God. I have been told that several times this past three years when I’ve admitted that Covid was kicking my butt. You just need to get your strength from God...you’re doing it wrong. His point was that obviously these were not folks God had called into ministry, because if they were, they would never get burned out.

Folks, Elijah was chosen by God. Scripture tells us that. In 1 Kings 17:2 says, “Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah.” This was between Elijah telling Ahab that there was going to be a drought and God telling Elijah where to hide out so that he would be taken care of during that drought. There is no doubt in scripture that God had called Elijah. In fact, it’s believed that Elijah never died. He was taken directly up into the heavens. Yet, here he is napping under a bush in the middle of the desert because he’s burned out.

**Burnout can happen to any of us!** Not because God wants that to happen, but because we have this freewill thing, and we don’t always live our lives in ways that are healthy and renewing not only to our spirit ~ but our body and mind as well. We don’t take care of ourselves.

**How did Elijah care for himself? ~ *One of the first things that Elijah did was he took a nap.*** The passage states that Elijah laid *“down under the tree and fell asleep.”* Sleep if vital for selfcare. It’s one of those things I learned firsthand.

When I was about 30, I started having all these weird things happen to my body. My joints started to hurt. The muscles in my legs hurt to the point that it was very painful to walk up and down stairs. Every day I felt like I had done a massive workout at the gym. I would wake up in the morning and the bottom of my feet felt like I spent the entire night walking barefoot on rocks. My skin itched. After several tests, I was told that my rheumatoid factors were off and the cells that were there to protect me were fighting with one another. I was finally diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia. I was transferred from one rheumatologist to another. Each of them prescribed medication to treat the symptoms that either didn’t work or I was allergic to.

So, I finally ended up in this doctor’s office in Ann Arbor. After looking through my chart, he asked me one question that changed my life. “How are you sleeping?” I thought I was sleep okay, but after a thorough discussion, the reality was I wasn’t. He explained how our bodies heal when we sleep and if we don’t sleep well, our bodies don’t heal. He firmly believed that if we could deal with the lack of quality sleep, all my other problems would go away. He was right.

In order for him to go from dead man walking to someone renewed, Elijah had to take time to rest his body. He had to catch up on sleep, and contrary to what science said years ago, you can. The *Sleep Foundation* has a great article on sleep debt written by Rob Newsom and reviewed by Dr. Anis Rehman titled *Sleep Debt and Catching up on Sleep.* In it, they discuss how sleep is an essential part of overall health and the lack of sleep can cause some serious health issue such as diabetes and heart disease as well as weight gain and a higher risk of accidents and falls. The lack of sleep affects our memory and our cognitive functions.

Their research showed that 1/3 of Americans get less than six hours of sleep (most of us need at least 7 quality hours) creating a sleep debt which is cumulative. Their research also showed that it can take up to four days of extra sleep to recover from one hour of lost sleep and up to nine days to eliminate that sleep debt all together. Think about the damage caused by weeks and weeks or years and years of this. We need to take care of our bodies and making sure we quality sleep is important. When Elijah stepped away from the chaos, that was the first thing he did. He took a nap. He got some rest. ***How are you sleeping? Are you getting enough sleep?***

**The second thing Elijah did to care for himself was to eat, and not just anything*. He ate healthy food.*** The passage tells us that the angel started a fire and baked a loaf of fresh bread along with drawing him some water, and when Elijah woke up, he offered it to him saying “eat.”

I want to remind you that this wasn’t Wonder bread or something that we would buy in the store – something we can keep on our shelf for weeks on end. That kind of bread has been processed to the point that it automatically turns to sugar when it hits our system. There’s really nothing healthy about most of the bread we purchase at the store. This was a whole grain bread, filled with protein and carbohydrates, things his body really needed to gain strength and energy. It was healthy.

In order to gain strength when we are really struggling through life, our bodies need healthy fuel. We need fruits and vegetables; we need whole grains; we need protein. Yet, we live in a country where it’s so easy to get unhealthy stuff. Not only is it easier, it’s cheaper. My husband was away this week and it was just me and the dogs. I get it when my mom says she eats cereal or cottage cheese or yogurt, because I didn’t want to cook for just me. I was looking for options while I was trying to distance myself from people, and I had a hard time finding a healthy option. Self-care includes filling our bodies with healthy fuel.

So, Elijah rested. Elijah filled his body with healthy fuel. **And then, Elijah got some exercise.** Our passages states that *“strengthened by the food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb.”* I know that we wouldn’t consider that exercise and that’s not exactly what they are telling us in this passage. Elijah was moving from one place to another. The rest and the food gave him the strength to move on. But Elijah lived in a different world than we do.

One of the things my mother always says that it so funny and so true is *“Only in America would we drive a kid three blocks to an exercise class.”* It’s true. My house in Parma is only two blocks from the café my mom owned, and when I worked for her, I had a young man ask me if my car was working. Yeah! He wanted to know why I didn’t drive to work. It was 2 ½ blocks...and not big city block, but small village blocks. Each block was about 200 ft...three houses with 66 ft. frontage. If you add in the roads, we’re talking maybe 600 ft. This young man couldn’t imagine why I would walk if I could drive.

Mayo Clinic wrote an article on depression and anxiety where they explain that regular exercise is not only good for our physical health. It’s also good for our mental and emotional health. Exercise releases feel-good endorphins and helps us take our minds off of our worries. We’re not talking run a marathon type of exercise...but take a walk type of exercise. In the ancient world, they walked everywhere. They stayed physically active. Physical activity is vital to self-care.

**Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, reminded them that *“your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you.” (6:19)*** Self-care begins not only with stepping back from the chaos, it start by taking time to take care of ourselves. American Psychologist Wayne Oats reiterates this when he said, ***“You can do nothing more spiritual than to maintain your own physical health. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You serve God well if you take care of your body as a means of worshipping God.”***

**Question for you as we prepare to go from this place today...how are you doing and what is it that you need to do...sleep better, eat better, and exercise more so that you can become your healthiest self?** Let us pray.