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Dead Man Walking: Elijah adjusted his attitude  
February 12, 2023**

Today, we’re continuing our series on how Elijah went from burned out to renewed and ready to serve and how we can too. So far, we’ve covered a lot. We need to step away from the chaos...the thing that’s causing our burn out. We need to care for our bodies. We need to draw strength from God and from one another. Another thing we need to do to move from burned out to renewed is to change our attitude.

I don’t often start a sermon with a disclaimer, but I feel that I need to today. Our topic today is about fostering a positive attitude. Last week, I shared that pre-Covid, close to 9% of adults suffered from clinical depression. When Covid hit, that number tripled. In 2021, it rose another 5% to about 1/3 of adults in the U.S. who admitted they were suffering from depression.

For those who are struggling with clinical depression, it’s real and we have to be careful that we do no harm. Folks suffering from clinical depression need professional care, whether it be medication, a good counselor or both. And when people are struggling, we can’t be quick to tell them to pick themselves up by their boot straps and get going. Sometimes, we just need to walk with them through it and help guide them to where they can get the best help. If you know someone who is struggling and don’t know where to start, call the office. We can help connect you.

That being said, our sermon today is really about self-reflection. It’s about taking time to look at where we are on the way to where we know God wants us to be. If you join me in asking for God’s grace in this place as we continue to look at what we can learn from Elijah’s story.

**Sermon:** I read this story this week about a USDA food inspector. It was part of an article that was published years ago where the inspector explained that he was responsible for inspecting 75k chickens a week as they were being processed through a local poultry plant. One of the things he said was, *“I never see a good chicken.”* Makes you want to give up eating chicken, doesn’t it?

He went on to explain what he meant by that. He said that through years and years of inspecting millions of chickens, it had become necessary for him to train himself to only see the bad ones, the ones that he needed to reject. So, that became the only thing he could see. He ignored the good ones and focused on looking for the bad ones.

The reality is that we often only see what we’re looking for. If all we’re looking for is the negative in life, that’s all we’re going to see.

Last week, I shared that when Covid hit, the number of people who admitted to experiencing signs of depression more than tripled. I get it. I was one of those people. In March of 2020, we got a call from the bishop (email actually.) The bishop asked us to suspend worship for just a couple of weeks. Remember that? It was early in Lent and we knew that it was going to be alright because we were going to be back together before Easter...we just forgot to specify which year.

The first couple of weeks were fine; they were a little stressful, but they were fine. Then, we realized that it wasn’t going to be that Easter. That summer we were able to worship outdoors, but we had to go back to virtual that fall...and that Christmas. Our commitment quickly became Wesley’s *“Do no harm”* and for the next 18 or so months, I dutifully watched those numbers. They became part of every decision we made as a leadership team.

Every time we thought we were close, the numbers would shoot up again. I was waking up in the middle of the night filled with anxiety and lots of questions. How do I care for my people? How do we create community knowing that community is an essential part of our faith? How do we live into our mission in a world that needed the church more than anything in that moment? How do we overcome the challenges of technology?

I do not regret our commitment to do no harm. I know we lost folks to other churches because of it, and I’m alright with that because it was better than loosing them to covid.

So, for about 18 months, I focused on these numbers. Every day, I would look them up. And people around me were beginning to see the negativity that was developing in me. In fact, a lot of my colleagues were suffering with the same problem. We were so focused on the negative that it was beginning to impact our lives.

**I get Elijah!** For three years, he had been living through this drought that had affected the whole country. Then there was this on-going conflict with King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal. He’s burned out.

In today’s passage, we’re still on the side of Mount Horeb. We’re still at that moment where God was asking him *“What are you doing here?”* Once again, Elijah offered that heartfelt rant where he says, “*Lord, I’m the only faithful person left in all of Israel. All the other people have compromised their faith. Nobody else has been diligent in serving you. I’m it and I’m tired.”*

***Talk about focusing on the negative.*** We know that he’s not the only one left. There’s 7,000 men back where he came from. But he’s focused on the negative and it’s one of the reasons he got burned out and discouraged, because here’s a scientific truth...**our attitude has the power to impact our health—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health—in major ways.** If all we focus on is doom and gloom, it has a way of weighing us down...crushing our spirits and literally sucking the life right out of us.

The book of Proverbs is full of passages that talk about one’s attitude:

Proverbs 17:22 ways, *“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”*

Proverbs 15:13, *“A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.”*

Proverbs 12:25, *“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.”*

Proverbs 4:23, “*Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”*

Medial science teaches us this same thing. Study after study shows a direct link between attitude and overall health. An optimistic attitude fosters good health; physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Laughter brings healing to the body as well as the mind. A positive attitude improves ones health. Just as Proverbs 17 states, a good attitude is good medicine. On the other side of that, a negative or pessimistic attitude take a toll on our entire well-being. It dries up our bones, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Elijah was stuck in his negative thinking, and his negative thinking was causing him to be discouraged and ultimately get burned out. He desperately needed to change his attitude, and this is that moment God kind of smacked him in the back of the head and got his attention.

Elijah...you’re not the only one left. There are 7000 more over near Damascus. You’re not alone...nor have you ever been alone. I’ve walked with you every step of the way. Wake up! Pay attention! Re-focus!

The Apostle Paul was constantly dealing with the negative attitude with members of the churches he served. In today’s passage, he reminded them, *“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds.”* Change your focus.

To the church in Philippi, he wrote, *“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Phil. 4:8)*

Do you know where Paul was when he wrote these words? He was in prison! Probably in Rome, maybe in Ephesus. He didn’t know if he was ever going to get out of prison, yet he still choose to focus on the positive as he offered encouragement to others. He knew about suffering. He was living that out every day, but he had hope in the resurrection of Christ. If God could raise Jesus from the clutches of the grave, then God could do anything and there was no place or circumstance that was beyond God’s grace or the hope it offered.

When my middle child reached puberty, her attitude got ugly. She was so negative. It got so bad that I finally got fed up and I took a black sharpie and went in her room and in big letters wrote *“Life is 10% circumstances and 90% attitude. YOU CHOSE YOUR LIFE!”*  Someone said to me, “you wrote that in permanent marker.” You darn tooting I did. Nothing a good coat of paint won’t cover up.

**The reality is that there are times when things happen that grab our attention...like Covid did...or the countless mass shootings...poverty...the earthquake in Syria and Turkey.** It can be easy to focus on those things or the disruption to our lives or the destruction that is happening all around us or the hurt people we care about are experiencing. It’s okay to care about these things. In fact, we must care about these things...but we also need to remind ourselves that we need to choose our attitude. We need to choose what we’re going to focus on. Life is always going to be mixed with the good and the bad. **We get to choose whether our focus in on the positive or the negative.**

For me, I had to step back to step #1...seperate yourself from the chaos. I understood that I couldn’t separate myself from the pandemic. It was all around, and I wasn’t going to drop our caution and potentially do harm, but I could stop checking these numbers every day. I could still keep those people in prayer, but not focus on that number that was causing me anxiety...especially when it jumped up. I could stop focusing on what I had no control over. I could choose to focus on the beautiful, wonderful things God was doing in the life of our congregation and in the world all around us. I could choose to focus on the fact that we had this gift of technology that allowed us to worship together even though we were apart. I could focus on all the amazing folks that showed up early and stayed late so that we could gather together safely on the front lawn. I could focus on all of the wonderful and creative ways that allowed us to create community and live out our mission. There was so much I could focus on other than the numbers and what we couldn’t do.

**Changing our attitude is hard work.** It’s intentional work. It’s about choosing to do something different. For Elijah, he chose to go back to Damascus and find Elisha. He chose to seek out the help God had provided. He chose to move forward instead of continuing to wallow in all that had happened.

We have that choice too...and if we choose to focus on the positive, most often, we are able to see the hand of God at work all around us.

***We get to choose the positive or the negative...and what we choose impacts our lives.*** Again, scientifically, a positive attitude has been proven to add to one’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

**How do we do this?** Simple...write it down. Take a moment each day to look for the blessings. Take a moment each day and look for where God is at work all around you. Take a moment each day to reflect on the good even if it was a bad day. Then, write them down. When we are intentional about looking for the good all around us, that’s what we will find.

I want to end with a parable about how one’s attitude can transform one’s life:

The story happened in the old west and there was this farmer sitting on the porch of the general store when a family drove up in their horse-drawn wagon loaded with all their earthly possessions. The father told the farmer they were looking for a new place to live. He then asked “Are the folks in this town friendly?” The old farmer said, “How were the folks back where you came from?” The man replied, “They were not friendly at all. That’s why we left.” The old farmer said, “Well, I’m sorry to tell you, but the folks here are just the same—they are not friendly at all.” With not even a thank you, the man and his family drove off.

A short while later, the scene played out again. Another family came driving by with their wagon filled with all their earthly possessions. They stopped at the general store, and the father said to the old farmer, “We are looking for a new place to live. Are the folks friendly in this town?” The farmer again asked “How were the folks in the town you came from?” The man smiled and said, “Oh, they were the best folks in the world. We hated to leave them.” The old farmer smiled and said, “You’re in luck mister. The folks in this town are just like the folks back where you came from.”

**The truth is that we often find just what we’re looking for.** And if we start focusing on the positive, that’s what we begin to see all around us. Renewal comes when we begin to change our attitude. Let us pray.