**Rev. Melissa J. Claxton
1 Kings 19 – February 5, 2023
Dead Man Walking: Elijah got help from others**

We are continuing our journey through this series *Dead Man Walking: How a Burned Out Prophet Came Back to Life.* So far, we’ve covered the necessity of stepping away from the chaos that is causing the stress in the first place. Second, take care of your basic human needs. Third, take time to turn to God and draw strength from that relationship.

Today, we continue the journey by looking at how Elijah got help from others and how we should too. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** Throughout this series, I’ve shared part of my journey when it comes to being in that place of feeling burned out. I’ve been there, and I think most of us have to some degree. Pre-pandemic, around 8.5% of adults suffered from depression and anxiety disorder. That tripled in 2020 when the pandemic hit to a staggering 27.8%. It worsened in 2021, climbing to about 33%. That’s 1 in 3 American adults suffered from depression in this last couple of years. I found those numbers staggering but not unexpected. It was a huge disruption in our lives, and although it’s been 3 years, many of us are still trying to get our feet back under us.

For me, about seven years into pastoral ministry, I kind of hit this wall where I was struggling and I needed to take time off. I ended up taking an 8-week renewal leave to renew my body and my spirit, but before that happened, I came to this point where I realized *“Man, I’m struggling.”* So, one Sunday morning, I decided to share that with the congregation as I asked them to keep me in prayer.

First off, always keep your pastor in prayer. Whether it’s me or anyone else...trust me when I say, *We NEED it!* Keep all you church leaders in prayer all the time.

That being said, on this particular Sunday, I decided to be totally vulnerable and honest with the congregation. I trusted that there was grace in that place. Fast forward 30 minutes...I had just asked for prayer earlier in the service and it’s now the end of service. I’m talking with folks as the transition into the fellowship hall for coffee and Sunday school. Shelia comes up to me and she says that she wants help. Maybe she could come over and help with something...maybe weed the flower beds or something.

Any guesses as to what my response was 30 minutes after I had admitted that I was struggling and I was not fine. *“Thank you so very much. That’s so kind of you, but it’s okay. I’m fine. Really!”*

**Anyone want to admit that you’ve done that?** The worse part is that it would be another 20 minutes before it hit me what I had just done. I was on my way from one church to another and I was thinking *“What did I just do? Woman...you told the entire congregation that you were struggling and when someone asked to helped you said, “I’m fine? Really?”* Why do we do that?

I learned a very important lesson that day. It was one of those Ah-ha moments where God kind of knocked me in the back of the head and said “Wake up!” That lesson was that ***You can’t ask God for help and then refuse the help God sends.”*** I want to repeat that. ***You can’t ask God for help and then refuse the help God sends.* Yet, if we’re honest with ourselves, we do it all the time.**

I don’t know if it’s cultural thing or a human condition thing, but I know that here in the United States, we struggle with the concept of receiving help from someone. When we find ourselves struggling, we’re quick to ask for prayers but we don’t accept the help God sends. I don’t know if we think God has this magic wand that God waves over the situation and then it’s all better. In my experience, that’s never how it works. What God does is put feet and hands to those prayers. These come in the form of folks all around us...people we know and people we don’t who are offering the helping had we asked for. Yet, we all too often refuse the help. We say, *“It’s okay! I’m fine...really. I don’t want to trouble you.”* When in reality we should be saying... *“Oh, man! I could use help with the dishes.”* Or *“Can you watch the kids one night this week?” “Could you just sit and talk with me.”* Or even and honest *“I don’t know what I need.”* **When we ask if there’s something we can do we need to mean it, and when someone asks if they can help, we need to be willing to accept the help they offer.**

Elijah is a perfect example of this. For the previous three years, Elijah was acting like the Lone Ranger when it came to ministry. He acted like he was working alone, without support, and a lot of time he was mostly because he was choosing to. His prayer says it all. God asked, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* and Elijah replied *“I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”*

This is the same speech he gave before God passed by the mountain the first time God asked *“Elijah, what are you doing here?”* Elijah stood at the base of the cave and witnessed the presence of God, not in the chaos of the storm or the earthquake or the fire, but in the gentle whisper or the sheer silence of the moment. He felt God with him. And yet, when God asks him *“What are you doing here?”* he offers the same emotion filled response.

If you have taken time to read Elijah’s story, what you would have found is that Elijah has never been alone in all of this. It’s not God’s intent that we are ever alone in anything God calls us to do. If you go back and start with chapter 17 when the drought first happens, God sent these birds to care for Elijah and bring him food. He was not alone. Then, God sent Elijah to the home of the widow woman and God used her to provide for him. Elijah was never alone.

Then, after Elijah shares this “feel sorry for me” statement again, God says, “*That’s it...that’s enough. Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus because there is a bunch of people there ready to help. You are not alone.”* (Okay...I ad-libbed a little bit there.) The point is that Elijah wasn’t alone. There were people ready to help; he simple had to be willing to accept the help that was available instead of caring that burden all by himself.

**Most of us aren’t very good at that, are we?** Most of us are not good at accepting a helping hand from someone else. I admit that I’m not always good at it. We have this lady, Michele, who has volunteered to teach sewing to our immigrant and refugee women on Thursdays. A couple of weeks ago, she volunteered to take some of this fabric home and sort it all out and take the older machines home and clean them up and oil them. My first response *“You don’t need to do that.”*  This time it didn’t take me 20 minutes to catch myself as scolding myself saying, *“Woman, will you stop doing that to yourself. She’s volunteered to do this. You’ve been asking for help...here’s help...let her do it.”* She did and now between her and my husband, we have 13 machines cleaned and ready to use, and she put together these awesome kits for tote bags our ladies made this week. They’re beautiful.

I don’t know what the reason is but most of us are not good at accepting help. We’re always asking God for help, but then refusing the help that God sends.

**You know who was good at it? Jesus!** Jesus, the Son of the Living God, was great at depending on others. The Son of God was great at asking for help. The first thing he did when he began his public ministry was to gather 12 disciples. These disciples would learn from him, but they would also support him. They were there with him every step of the way helping him. They were doing this ministry together.

In Luke 10, we read that Jesus sent the 72 out to prepare for him to go and preach to the people. This was help. These folks were going ahead of him to get things ready. And in that passage, we read that he ***“sent them out two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.”*** *(10:1)* Not alone but in pairs. Jesus never sent people out alone. There were always two or three, so that they could support one another and help one another.

Just before that, in Luke 9, after feeding the 5000, Jesus was tired. He knew that he needed to take time to care for himself, but he didn’t do it alone. In that passage, we read that he went up the mountain to pray, taking with him his inner circle...Peter, James, and John. He took those three with him to the Garden of Gethsemane as well when he went there to pray before the crucifixion. He had the 12, but he also had these three that he could call on to support him when he was struggling.

**The Son of God didn’t do it alone. If Jesus was willing to get help from others, shouldn’t we be?**

I love our passage from Ecclesiastes. *“****Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up...if two lie down together, they will keep warm...two can defend themselves.”***

God created us to be in community. We find this all throughout scripture. When God called Abraham, he had Sarah and Lot with him. When God called Moses, he also called Aaron. The Apostle Paul was surrounded by folks that were helping him. He always had a partner in ministry that he could call on to help.

This isn’t just about being called to be in ministry and making sure you have support. God created us to be in community, to love and support one another, and that beautiful gift of the church. Over the years, I’ve read a lot of scientific studies around the benefits of church, and consistently they show that people who are part of a faith community...whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim...live on average 7 to 8 years longer than those who don’t.

Recently, with the amount of people who’ve stepped away from faith communities, they’ve tried to do those same studies around spirituality but haven’t been able to because it’s too hard to measure. I don’t think it’s the same. I don’t think that the longevity comes from simply read scripture and being in prayer. I think it comes from purpose and being part of a community and knowing that you’re not alone. We’re here to help one another, to lift one another up, and care for one another in their times of need...maybe take a meal or offer a kind ear or even wash a few dishes. I believe the longevity comes from the sense of belonging and support.

I get that it can be hard to ask for help or even depend on others. Sometimes, we’re disappointed or let down and it can feel easier to just do it ourselves, but **We can’t ask God for help and then refuse the help God sends.** That’s not what God wants and it’s not what we need. We are called to love and support one another.

I want to end with a story from Sister Peggy. Sister Peggy is a Catholic nun who served in El Salvador starting at the beginning of their civil war in the late 80s. When they go word that the troops were coming, the village had to evacuate or risk being killed. One day, this happened and it happened so quickly that you didn’t have time to gather supplies. So, they’re out in the jungle and the only one that has food was this pregnant woman. And everyone is telling her that she needed to keep it for herself because of the baby. Sister Peggy said, this young woman told them ***“Today, we eat together. Tomorrow, we starve together.”*** We journey through this life together and we need to learn to depend on one another to help us through.