

C Lectionary 12 6.19.22

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Focus Statement: God plays the long game with us.

The sermon podcast I listen to called this summer, “the summer of the prophets” because the Old Testament texts this year are going to take us through some of the prophetic writings. We’re starting out with Elijah and Elisha, then we’ll move to Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah—my favorite—before spending a good chunk of time with Jeremiah. The Spirit is never consistent enough with me that I can commit to a whole summer of the prophets, though I think that would be fun. But I want to talk about them at least this week, because this Elijah story is one of my favorite Old Testament tales, one that I jokingly refer to as the “Spiritual disciple of the snack and the nap.”

But before we talk about snacks and naps, and their importance in our faith journeys, let’s talk a little bit about prophets. Prophets sometimes get thought of as people who can predict the future, but that’s not what a prophet is. A prophet is someone who can speak truth to the present. There may be implications for what might happen in the future, but that is not a prophet’s main purpose. The prophet’s purpose is to say, here is a thing that is bad right now, pay attention to this thing. This means, as you might imagine, prophets are not very popular. They are especially not popular with the people doing—or even just benefiting from—whatever bad thing they are pointing out.

Another thing that’s true about prophets, is that they’re people. They say hard things, they speak bold truths that need to be spoken, but most of them don’t really seem to like that

call from God all that much. They get tired, they get grumpy, they wish their job was easier, just like the rest of us. Elijah was no exception.

To really get the context of today's reading, we have to know what came before it. Elijah showed up on the scene in chapter seventeen, and for the previous two chapters, he was kicking butt and taking names, he was the prophet's prophet. He predicted a drought, he brought the widow of Zarephath's son back from the dead, he spoke hard truth to King Ahab—and nobody spoke like that to Ahab, he set up this crazy prophet's duel with four-hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and proved God to be greater than Baal, he ended the drought that he had earlier predicted, he was on it. But have you ever had that experience where you've just done a whole bunch of really hard things? Physically hard, mentally hard, emotionally hard, doesn't matter what kind of hard, just a bunch of things that were really taxing, and then someone asks you to do an easy thing, and you can't? Like you're just done? That's kind of what happened to Elijah here, I think. He'd spent two chapters being this total tough guy prophet, faced down all these prophets of Baal, and now Jezebel was all, "I'm going to do to you what you did to them," and he's just inexplicably overcome with fear.

Which, friends, I totally get. He's tired. His being a big, strong leader energy is just completely worn out. I've told you all this before, but this is why during the pandemic Travis would regularly order food for me when we'd get takeout. My decision-making muscles were so exhausted from trying to keep on top of the rapid rate of change that 'what

do you want to eat tonight' was more than I could handle. Elijah was human, we're human, there's only so much we can handle.

The text tells us that to escape Jezebel, Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat under a bloom tree, and whined, basically. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." This is pretty high drama for the guy who just faced down four-hundred and fifty angry prophets. And here Elijah did something else I totally relate to. He worked himself into such a frenzy that he fell asleep. Do any of you do that? I totally do this. During a particularly rough semester of college, I thought I lost my hairbrush—because my roommate for some reason thought it belonged to someone else, even though it was on my dresser, and gave it away, but anyway—and in looking for it I turned my whole room upside down and finally passed out in an exhausted heap on my unmade bed. The hairbrush was not the issue, though I was pretty happy when my neighbor, confused as I was as to how she'd ended up with it, returned it the next day. But, the point is, I get Elijah here. I get how his toughness finally gave way, and he was just a tired guy sitting under a tree wishing he didn't have to do life anymore.

Probably because I so relate to Elijah here, I love God's response. God didn't get all grumpy with Elijah, look at all the cool stuff you did through me, and now you're whining because Jezebel. No, God sent an angel to give Elijah a snack. Because sometimes friends, we just need a snack. Here's another fun fact about your pastor. I'm not a person who gets hangry. That's a thing, it's not my thing. When I'm hungry, I don't always notice I'm hungry, but I'll get sad or confused. This was a joke among my seminary classmates, Kjersten looks sad,

someone get her a sandwich. They weren't wrong. When you're focused on something, like Elijah was, it can be hard to remember to take care of ourselves, to get the necessary rest and recovery we need. Elijah was tired, God gave him a snack and let him take a nap.

After he'd napped a while, the angel came back a second time, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." There's no real way to know the tone, but I just hear such tenderness in those words. Get up and eat, take the time you need, take the rest you need, you cannot care for others if you do not first care for yourself.

So that's the snack and nap part, but there's more even to this story. Elijah went out, the text tells us, and "went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb...[where] he came to a cave and spent the night there." Which, let's point out real quick, what not where he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be in Israel challenging the wicked ways of Ahab and Jezebel, not hiding in a cave in the wilderness. So God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" To which Elijah, rather whinely, answered, basically, "I did all this hard stuff for you, and now I'm the only one left, I'm all alone, and everyone hates me." Which wasn't true, but again, I relate. It can feel that way sometimes. Like you're the only one doing all the hard stuff and no one else is helping or cares.

And God again, is so patient with Elijah. Patient, but also doesn't let him wallow. He took him to a mountain, where first a great wind passed, then an earthquake, then fire, all common signs of the power of God, but God wasn't in any of them. Then there was the sound of sheer silence. One of the commentaries I read point out that God wasn't in the

silence either, really, but it was the silence that drove Elijah out, where a voice came to him again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah told his sob story again, and the lectionary ended the passage there. Which I think is really unfortunate because the next thing that happened was God sent Elijah to find Elisha, so that Elisha could become his disciple.

Dear people of God, there is a lot I love about this story, a lot of ways I hope this story will speak to you this morning. I love God's tenderness with Elijah, hearing him out, letting him vent, giving him space to be frustrated, afraid, angry. I love most of all that God didn't leave Elijah in that frustration. First God tried a nap and a snack, and when that didn't work, another nap and snack. And when that didn't work, a sign of God's presence. And then, after all that, a companion, to lighten Elijah's load and eventually take over his mission.

Dear people of God, here's the promise in Elijah's story. Sometimes, like chapters seventeen and eighteen, you're on top of the world. Things are going great, you're busting through stuff, everything is awesome. Other times, they're not. You're tired, you're hungry, an angry queen is trying to kill you. OK, maybe not that last one, but you get the point. The point is, stuff happens, good stuff, bad stuff, frustrating stuff, boring stuff. In all of it, the earthquakes and the silence, the displays of strength and the naps, there too, there always, is God. Steady, present, constant, giving us what we need. Checking in, whether we can see it or not, putting in our lives companions on the journey. Tired or elated, alone in a cave or on top of the world, wherever you are, there with you is God. Amen.