



Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • March 13, 2022
The Second Sunday of Lent



THE SCRIPTURE
1 Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

THE MESSAGE
“Sacred Rhythms: Flesh-and-Blood Spirituality”
Mark Briley

According to the World Nap Organization – yes, there is such a thing – nearly 40% of nappers feel guilty for indulging in a little shuteye. Maybe we feel guilty because we see napping as weakness. Maybe we feel guilty napping because there is so much to

be done. How could we be so selfish as to take a nap? It may be why one person said, *"Taking naps sounds so childish. I prefer to call them 'horizontal life pauses.'"*

Whatever you got to do, right? We 40 percenters have our reasons for the guilt, I suppose. But the 60 percenters remind us how great naps can be! There are all sorts of 'nap memes' out there. One said, *"Yeah, there's a nap for that."* Naps are the original life hack. *Sad?* There's a nap for that. *Tired?* There's a nap for that. *Angry?* There's a nap for that. Isn't that true?

There was an American businessman who went on vacation to another country and came across a local fisherman who was unloading his fishing boat. *"How long it takes you to catch those fish?"* the businessman inquired? *"Only a little while,"* the fisherman said. The American was incredulous. *"Why don't you stay out longer and catch more? Plenty of day left!"* Fisherman said he could but didn't see the point. He said, *"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and in the afternoon take a siesta with my wife Maria. I have a full life."* The businessman tried to lay out for him a business plan on a napkin, showing him how if he caught more fish he could expand the business, buy more boats, hire other fishermen, eventually make millions. *"Millions?"* the fisherman asked, *"Then what?"* The American replied, *"That's the best part. You could retire. Sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, and take siestas with your wife."*

Does that sound about right? We are culturally driven to push and push and push ourselves and then push a little more regardless of any cost to our bodies and our spirits. And I'm not arguing for a poor work ethic here. I'm just acknowledging that when our bodies are not synced well with our spirits, both will suffer.

It may be why the most appropriate meme of the morning is this: *"This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible, Elijah was like, 'God, I'm so mad! I want to die!' so God said, 'Here's some food. Why don't you have a nap?' So, Elijah slept, ate, and decided things weren't so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap and a snack."*

This is the very passage we ponder this morning on this second Sunday of our Lenten series entitled, *"Sacred Rhythms,"* inspired by Ruth Haley Barton's book by the same title. Today? Flesh-and-blood spirituality – the consideration of our bodies as holy vessels that carry some unique essence of the character of God.



Elijah was certainly one of those unique humans – a prophet celebrated by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. “*He’s kind of a big deal,*” as some are prone to say. He shows up in the Hebrew Bible – what we generally call the Old Testament or First Testament – in the book of 1st Kings. Now, 1st Kings represents a forever struggle that is as rampant today as it was back then. This idea of sovereignty – of authority, power, control – theologians have wrestled with it for years – “*Is God in total control? Does free will alter sovereignty? Are we partners? Do we have agency or is it all pre-destined anyway and makes no matter what we do?*” Plenty of arguments over coffee tables, and dinner tables, and boardroom tables, and even communion tables. God’s sovereignty is one of the most difficult things for people of faith to live out in everyday routines. From our personal daily affairs to the direction of the cosmos – how do we trust that God not only ‘*is*’ but is also *leading us* somewhere?

A couple of authors (*among other things*), Don Miller and Bob Goff were hosting a leader’s retreat. It was sort of loosely scheduled to the point that on the second day, Bob asked, Don, “*What are we doing next?*” Bob’s a Seven on the Enneagram for any of you Enneagram students out there – always up for the next adventure – who needs a schedule, right? What fun is that? But Don answers his question saying, “*Oh, I thought we’d just let them have 3-4 hours of free time.*” Bob says, “*Don... people want to be led somewhere.*” So, they decided to load up the group on a boat and ride out to this majestic waterfall and asked some leading questions given their setting and it blew them all away.¹

Just a little guidance. A little leadership. While there’s a place for downtime and all of that... when it comes to our faith... don’t we want to be led somewhere? Herein lies the struggle. Who do we trust to lead? God? Or the rest of us? And how... do... we... know what’s what? Elijah was down for this battle over God’s sovereignty and the others being raised as opposing gods themselves.

This is part of our faith ancestor’s history – the Hebrew Kings which begin in the books of Samuel. This story shares that it was not God’s idea that the Hebrews have a king... but here we are. And it never worked out that well. Five-hundred years and more than 40kings, there wasn’t much evidence that they got anywhere all that effectively. A few bright spots – like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah – but even then, the brightness was pretty dim. No matter our best intentions, humanity’s ability to lead often caroms into realms of destruction of some kind.

1st and 2nd Kings are, as Eugene Peterson claims, “*a relentless 500-year documentation proving that the Hebrew demand of God to “have a king” was about the*

¹ A story as told by Donald Miller on his *Building a StoryBrand* podcast. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/building-storybrand-donald-miller-clarify-your-message/id1092751338?mt=2>

worst thing they could have asked for.” But... as he goes on to note... “*In the midst of the incredible mess these kings are making of God’s purposes, God continues to work toward the peaceable kingdom and uses us in the work.*” God doesn’t discard us or detour around us but says, “*Come on. We’ll redeem this yet.*” Isn’t that a relief? To me it says we’re never too far gone. It means no matter what your struggle is right now – in that relationship, in your job, in your own existential angst – God is saying: “*Hey – you and me – we can do this.*” And when it comes to nations and wars and big-picture stuff – as bad as we can make it, God is still working in and through us to get the ship steering the right direction.²

So, in this book of Kings, we have God processing a way through, carrying out life through some of the most unlikely and uncooperative people who have ever lived. Elijah enters the picture a couple of chapters ahead of our text for today. Not much fanfare in the introduction. One version simply says, “*And then this happened: Elijah the Tishbite, from among the settlers of Gilead, confronted Ahab...*” and he drops a prophecy about a long drought coming. How would you like your introduction for all of history to be, “*And then this happened...*”

What happens next is some amazing moments of miracles and healing and survival and Elijah coming to a place of battle against the opposing communities who worshiped Baal – not the Hebrew God, Yahweh. You may have heard this story of the great test – Elijah on his own versus a huge group of Baal followers. The contest? Whose God would respond to the call for fire? Again – we don’t seem to do all that well talking to each other – we’d just rather have winner-take-all contests. So here we go; the my-God-can-beat-up-your-God contest. The short of it? The Baal prophets try first and no matter what they try, they can’t call down fire on their sacrificial ox. Elijah, feeling confident, has his altar all fixed up and drenched with water... waterlogging the whole thing for the powerful effect. He does a few card tricks to entertain the crowd while the people were drenching his wood pile. “*Is it the Ace of Hearts?!*” It always is. And then it was time, and he prayed that God might show up in a big way, and the whole thing erupts in flames, and the crowd goes wild! But, being upstaged, the opponents were ready to fight now, and it’s this huge massacre, and Elijah “*wins*” if you want to call it that, and he gets out of Dodge knowing he’s now a wanted man and will most likely be hunted down and killed. This finally leads us to the nap and snacks.

Elijah has been on the run. His adrenaline has crashed, and he’s exhausted and, to be honest, he’s just tired of it all. He feels alone. Nobody else cares. Everybody else quit the committee, and he’s been left doing all the work. Do you know this frustration? So,

² From the introduction to 1st King’s as found in *The Message*. Eugene Peterson. NavPress. 2002.



Elijah finds a broom tree which looks like this: The text says, “*a solitary broom tree.*” He’s the last, lonely prophet, and so his greatest affinity is this lonely, solitary broom tree. Elijah is just going off: “*God, kill me now. I’m done.*”

We all have surely felt this way... and often when our bodies are exhausted... it’s why Sabbath keeping and care of our bodies and rest are not just “*good ideas,*” they are essential to our wellbeing. Our spirits will not be well if we can’t do our best to care for our bodies. Now... I know our bodies betray us sometimes... from no doing of our own, we are stricken with disease or injury, and we have struggles that are out of our power to heal. It’s part of the amazing mystery that is our flesh and bones. How are these fleshy suits somehow vessels where God’s Spirit is planted to do some meaningful work? And why is it that we are so abusive and hateful to our own bodies and the bodies of others? How have we claimed at times that male bodies are more important than female bodies, or straight bodies are more important than gay bodies or trans bodies, or white bodies are more important than bodies of a deeper hue?

The grandmother of a ministerial colleague of mine, Ozola Hughes, died three years ago this week. My friend shared the memory on her social feeds this week; a picture of her Gigi’s beautifully brown hands – “*98 years young,*” she said. I couldn’t help but think of what those hands and her very body experienced in those 98 years. A Black woman, born in 1921, raised in the South, without the same rights as others because of her body. And yet... this Spirit that expressed through her granddaughter – whose Black body leads a multi-racial Disciples church in Dallas – says, “*We are happy to wait on the Lord...*” as she affirms the word of the prophet Isaiah.³



How do we exist well, at home even, in our bodies, friends? The Christian practice of honoring our bodies (*even when we must claim the sin of our history and our present of not honoring everyone’s bodies*) is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God’s own goodness – in diverse and marvelous ways. And if this is so,

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caring for our bodies is, indeed, a spiritual practice. When there's not "*check engine lights*" flashing, we may ignore our body in favor of other "*more spiritual*" endeavors but loving our bodies – caring for our bodies – is as spiritual an endeavor as any.

Ruth Haley Barton gave this growing thought and ultimately said, "*I grew more and more curious about what it might look like to glorify God in my body.*"⁴ She, like most of us, can surely recall moments of gratitude for the particular body we were given and moments when we wished mightily for a different one.

Our culture will be the first to tell us that our vessels aren't good enough. Culturally we have an excessive and misdirected focus on the "*perfect*" body, and we couple that with disturbing levels of irreverence regarding human sexuality – all of which makes it more difficult to know how to relate to the body in a spiritual way. But biblically – the body is a place where the presence of God can be known and experienced. Jesus put on flesh, lived, and thrived, and struggled, and died... but also says, "*This is my body, given for you.*" Flesh-and-blood spirituality... body and spirit... both gift. Neglect of the body is the neglect of spirit and may lead to Elijah's inclination in exhaustion to say, "*Done. God, I'm done. Take me out.*"

This scene is truly the inspiration of the Snickers commercials about people being desperately grumpy when they're hangry. "*I want to die!*" Elijah shouts, and an angel shows up and says, "*Eat this and take a nap.*" The result when his body gets some rest and nourishment? His perspective changes. The angel of God essentially says, "*Take care of your body... you've got a long journey ahead of you and you won't make it otherwise.*"

Interesting enough, it wasn't until he attended to his body that he was able to hear what God wanted of him. In our own ways, we need to move from ignoring or despising our bodies and allow them to become an ally in the reorientation of our internal and external lives. We seem to be more able to trick our minds for a while... but our bodies tend to not let us slide by without consequence. God created us for wholeness. That spiritual wholeness includes collaboration with our bodies. Feel your body... how does it want you to pray? How is it leading you to serve? How does it call you to connect with your spirit?

Our bodies are beautiful in their being and their purpose. It is our bodies that allowed us to be the Body of Christ all over this city this week – helping people move, shoveling snow off of neighbor's driveways, climbing ladders and hanging banners, hosting the community to celebrate the life of one of Broadway's beloveds, washing dishes in the church kitchen after we invited all to eat praying, "*Bless this food to the nourishment of*

⁴ *Sacred Rhythms*. Ruth Haley Barton. IVP Books. 2006. Her influence is evident in this message as well as in the formation of the entire series.

our **bodies**...” Our bodies allowed us to embody hope and move about... from Pastor’s Class students and their Faith Partners to new folks wandering into a *Together @ 10:10* service, and vulnerable stories being shared last Wednesday night at our *What it’s Like to be Me* series. This is *embodied* prayer. At some point, we move beyond the vanity of our bodies to the glory of our bodies.

My grandfather always used to laugh when the great-grands, who had barely discovered their fingers and their voices, would pinch the back of his hand and say, “*Old skin.*” He just smiled and laughed and enjoyed their marveling. They weren’t judging or recommending new skin cream... they were just connecting bodies and souls with one whose lap might as well have been the throne of God to them.

At some point we, as Richard Rohr says, “*enjoy the moon itself instead of fighting over whose finger points to it most accurately, quickly, or definitively.*”⁵

Just look at that moon. Wow. Our family chases the moon sometimes -- “*That’s a blood moon,*” the kids will say or offer something they’ve learned from school about what we are to look for in the sky. So, when the view is just not quite right, we’ll chase it... down the side roads, past the grove of trees until we find a clearing and there it is in all its glory. Our bodies, standing, marveling at the universe... simply a part of the greater picture of God’s cosmos. There is a knowing... a deep knowing... that vanity can’t contain. I don’t need *your* body any more or *your* image or *your* glory... God has settled in *my* very vessel... and it’s good. God even said, “*It’s very good.*” Let’s quit fighting over who can point to God with the best theologically astute finger and simply marvel at who God alongside of one another. Your body isn’t bad... it’s beautiful and God is working with and through your particular body to teach the world something extraordinary.



Look. Bodies climb cliffs and dunk basketballs. Bodies move paint brushes and write poems. Bodies run marathons and embrace friends. Bodies lend a helping hand and wipe tears of loved ones. Bodies help strangers across the street and stir ingredients to make wedding cakes. Bodies are baptized in water and deliver babies. Bodies hold hands and fix hair.

Bodies even breathe into other bodies that aren’t breathing and that breathless body breathes again. Bodies in Poland leave baby strollers at the train station for refugee bodies arriving from Ukraine with a tiny body in their arms.

⁵ From “*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life.*” Richard Rohr. Jossey-Bass Publishing. San Francisco. 2011.

At some point, we come to know that we all have bodies – unique and beautiful and colorful – and despite any difference we see in our bodies, we are, as one writer said, “*equally naked underneath our clothes.*” That may not feel like a whole lot of knowing, but even this little bit of honesty and vulnerability gives us a strange, peaceful, kinship. Every *body* needs rest and nutrition, exercise, and connection and... as we learn from Elijah... every *body* needs all of that in order to best hear what God has to say to us.

So, love your vessel. Have a little grace for your vessel and the vessels of others; take a nap and have a snack. God is waiting for a word with you.

SONG OF FOCUS

“Nourished”

Words and Music: Ed Varnum

1. You sat at table, you broke the bread,
gave to your friends, and then you said,
“This is my body. It’s given for you.”
Spirits were nourished, renewed.
2. You called from the shore to the fishermen,
saying, “Come and eat breakfast,” and fed them.
Uniting disciples in friendship and kin,
nourished without and within.

Refrain:

May we be nourished in body and soul,
spiritually, physically, God make us whole,
that we might be strengthened to serve each day,
healthy in every way!

3. You said to come to a quiet place
to pray and to rest from this frenzied pace.
We need to find peace with so much that we face,
seeking to live in your grace.

Refrain:

May we be nourished in body and soul,
spiritually, physically, God make us whole,
that we might be strengthened to serve each day,
healthy in every way!

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH