

“Something To Keep Us in the Fight”

1 Kings 19:1–18

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Many of you know that we have hosted for two years now in January the local version of the National Day of Racial Healing sponsored by the Triangle YMCA, the Encouraging Place, the Triangle MLK Committee, The Raleigh Chamber, Wake County, and Wells Fargo. These have been meaningful events, a privilege to host. Last month we hosted a follow-up meeting and were delighted to do so, but I confess that at first, I thought the focus was odd. It was on health, wellbeing, and rest in connection to equity. There is no question about our need for more health, wellbeing, and rest, but how would this be a priority for a group addressing racial healing?

Then, I thought about it... Those who work for racial healing and social justice in any form need healthy practices of self-care because it is exhausting work – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Never has this been more true than it is now. In a recent interview, U2’s articulate lead singer Bono said that he used to believe Dr. King’s quote of Theodore Parker, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Bono said, “I don’t believe that anymore. We have to bend it.” Indeed, we do, and it is exhausting work.

So, the focus on care and rest was appropriate. The presentations by Dr. Lisa Scott and Dr. Sterling Freeman were on rest and joy respectively. The first was very helpful, though a bit ironic for me. I came in on my day off to think about how I need to establish boundaries and make sure I make space for rest... But as I say, it was helpful, as was the time spent reflecting on joy, not happiness, but an inner sense of purpose and fulfillment, what keeps us going, what keeps in the fight, along with rest. The entire focus made perfect sense to me.

I think it would for the prophet Elijah too. In the familiar reading from 1 Kings 19, he finds himself at rock bottom. He has been faithful

to God, he has taken on the prophets of Ba'al, hundreds of them, and he has prevailed, and by the way, had them killed. But Jezebel, who is responsible for the worship of Ba'al gaining traction and thus fond of these prophets, threatens to take Elijah's life.

Jezebel — we know the name and we know she is a bad gal, even if we don't remember why. We know to boo and hiss when we hear her name... I once stuck my neck out for this assumption. I was talking to a young couples class in another setting about the danger of using biblical words, names especially, without knowing what they mean.

For example, I said, please don't name your daughter Jezebel, at which point one woman said, "But we named our daughter Jezebel." My gut clenched immediately. She said it with such a straight face, and she held that face for what seemed like an eternity. Apologies and excuses ran through my mind until finally she started to laugh and said, "Just kidding!" Jezebel continues to haunt people in different ways...

She threatens Elijah and he runs away and hides in fear first under a broom tree, later in a cave, very much like Moses once did. There are many parallels between these two. Elijah is so frightened and exhausted that he asks God to go ahead and take his life. He has had enough, he can't take anymore, he's doesn't think he is doing a great job, and he is the only person left who is faithful to God. He needs help — rest, refuge, perspective, strength - whatever God can give him to continue his ministry, to keep him in the fight. And as the story continues, God provides him help in ways that might benefit us as well.

One thing God does is give Elijah time for rest and refuge as well as strength for the journey. The first part of this is understanding. God could chastise the prophet for whining and falling down on the job. He's not the only one faithful to God, we will get to that. But while God does ask Elijah what he is doing here, twice, and thus not about his work, God does not chastise him. God knows he feels like he is the only one who is faithful, even if he is not, God knows he is frightened and exhausted.

So, God allows him space to vent and then sends an angel to feed him, to give him strength physically and emotionally. The angel touches him and tells him to get up and eat, and he sees a cake baked on hot

stones and a jar of water. After he eats and drinks and lies down to rest, the angel touches him again and tells him to eat again, for he will need strength for his journey. And he does.

It's difficult to know all the ways this angelic visitation helps Elijah. He obviously needs to eat. But there are other ways these holy encounters bolster his conviction. It's partly the companionship and partly that an angel is, by definition, a messenger of God, meaning God is strengthening him, apparently for some purpose.

Of course, eventually God shows up directly in the form of sheer silence. This is the most familiar part of the story. God is in the silence, not in the wind, earthquake, or fire. This doesn't mean God never communicates in more direct ways. We sometimes over-read this part of the text. But here God is found in silence, perhaps because Elijah needs to learn to listen better, and the point is God is still with the prophet. All this helps keep him in the fight of his prophetic calling.

God helps us in similar ways when we are weary in our fight. It may be in the realm of justice in this time when progress in the realm of racial, gender, and identity equality is being rolled back, civil rights are being lost, immigrants are being scapegoated and oppressed, and many institutions that help us all but especially the poor and vulnerable are being dismantled. Fighting against this landslide of injustice masquerading as reform is exhausting. Those who fight need a break.

But our battle may be against an illness or a loved one's illness. There is nothing more exhausting than providing around the clock care for a loved one who can't get well but still needs the best life possible. It may be with a personal demon or challenge that requires vigilance. Or it may be our daily life — work, education, whatever challenges us day after day. No matter what our fight is, God offers refuge and strength.

To begin with, God understands our fatigue and frustration and thus gives us space to vent. We all need someone to understand our struggle and allow our whining... for a time. God does. Then, God offers us the sustenance we need, and thank God for us Southerners, some of it comes in the form of food. It is the language of compassion in the South. When people are sick or grieving, we send the casserole brigade. When someone we care about is in crisis and we don't know

what we do, we offer to take them to lunch. Whatever the problem is, we throw food at it, and it usually helps. If we know this, God knows.

I have told many of you about my grandmother in Lincolnton. She was not verbally warm or physically affectionate, but she expressed love through food. If I was tired or sick, lonely or still looking for love, the answer was fried chicken or pork roast, black-eyed peas and slaw, homemade biscuits and banana pudding or perhaps stickies. Though my presenting challenge may not have disappeared, I felt better, I had more energy to do whatever I needed to do next.

God works through the details of life as simple as food when we are down, and God visits us through the agency of angels, reminding us that God is still involved in our lives. They may not have wings or halos. They may come in the form of small children who make us smile or strangers who are kind to us in simple ways or friends who say just the thing we need to hear, whether we want to hear it or not. But God sends messengers of encouragement who keep us in the fight.

And God shows up for us directly and speaks words of encouragement, if we know how to listen. Elijah has to pay attention in the silence. So may we, but we also may need to listen for God's voice in the details of life. For God speaks in many ways. Sometimes simply knowing that God is with us is all the encouragement we need to continue with whatever fight is ours.

But God gives Elijah something more than rest, refuge, and strength — a continuing sense of purpose with specific next steps to take. Elijah is to anoint new leadership, royal and prophetic. His work is not done. This may seem obvious, but it is not to the prophet. People in crisis mode tend to have limited vision. When we're having our own personal pity party, hitting our lowest valley right after climbing our highest mountain, it seems like there is nothing left to do and no one can convince us otherwise... well, no one except God. "Get to work!" God says, which is what Elijah needs to hear at this point.

Quite often this is what we need to hear, after we have been given space to express our frustration and receive strength and encouragement. For the truth is a sense of purpose is one of the most encouraging gifts

we can receive. I think of the second presentation at the conference on racial healing, the one on joy. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Joy does not depend on the circumstances of our lives. It is an inner sense of peace that comes from knowing our lives have purpose. When we have a sense of purpose, we have joy, and joy keeps us going.

Francis of Assisi exuded this kind of joy in ways that stunned people around him. When he embraced his calling and left everything to follow it, encountering poverty and hardship in many forms, friends expressed concern for him, but he said he couldn't be sad when he considered the great future that awaited him. They thought he was crazy. He simply trusted God's purpose in his life. So can we.

There is one other thing God gives Elijah that we should note. It is easy to miss. It comes at the very end of the story. In fact, the lectionary editors don't include these verses, which seems odd. God says, almost as an aside, "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Ba'al, and every mouth that has not kissed him." In other words, "Oh, by the way, Elijah, you are not the only one who has remained faithful to me."

This may sound like a pointed critique. "I've got other faithful followers, you self-righteous sod!" And it has an element of correction, but it is a word of encouragement, "Take heart, you are not alone."

Whatever our struggle is - the fight for justice, the long-term care of a loved one, or any other challenge - it is helpful to know we are not alone, we have companions.

I think of the war-protest song "Alice's Restaurant" written and performed by Arlo Guthrie. It is long, but it ends with the suggestion that we might walk into the military psychiatrist's office, singing the chorus. They might think we are crazy. So, we might walk in with a friend, but they might think we are gay, he says. So, what if fifty people walk in singing the song? They might think it's a movement, but if fifty people walk in every day, they will know it's a movement!

You get the point. There is strength in numbers, it is good to know we are not alone. This can keep us in the fight, especially if we have time to rest and a clear purpose, this can keep us in the fight.