

“On Edge”
1 Kings 19:4-8
August 2

Last week in the news we heard about the resignation of the former governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, and all the jokes made about her for quitting under pressure. What do you do when you reach the end of your rope? When work is exhausting or problems are draining you with no hope in sight, how do you respond? When you have worked on something so hard but only to see very little change, how do you find the energy to keep going? When social justice issues seem to persist even with our best efforts? There are many things in life that are very challenging for us from health struggles to relationship issues. Thomas Jefferson once said, “When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.” But how do you do that? It is easier said than done.

In today’s Bible story, the great prophet Elijah was at the point of quitting. He was exhausted and on the run. He could not see any hope for going on. Even the great prophet Elijah felt discouraged in his ministry and vocation. He was scared, running for his life. He was exhausted. Elijah’s ministry begins in the Bible in chapter 17 of 1 Kings with his prophecy against King Ahab. He was one of many prophets for his time, yet he was the only one who dared speak up against the king. Ahab was a worshipper of Baal. He did not follow the faith of Israel. He was also an unjust king. Later on in 1 Kings we hear about them killing a man in order to get his land. Even after all the examples of God’s work, Ahab and Jezebel were bent toward sin. In chapter 18, Elijah had a great and wonderful experience of God’s presence. He was put to the test to show if he was truly a prophet from God. He succeeded in all of that. However, Jezebel, was still seeking to take his life. Elijah was on the run to save his own life and was at the point of giving up. In fact, he prayed to God to take his life because he could not see any hope out the mess he was in. He was one person against a king and his army. And no matter how many miracles he can show the king, nothing seemed to work. Moses felt the same way when the people complained in the wilderness. Moses felt inadequate for the job.

The answer to Elijah’s dilemma comes in his time of rest. As he falls asleep, the angel of God comes to him and helps him find food and drink. Elijah finds in his time of rest a time of renewal. As he sleeps, he gets a renewed vision of God’s vision for his ministry. The answer and hope do not come from more frantic running or hard work. A renewed vision for life and ministry come to Elijah in his time of rest. It is interesting that Elijah was at Barsheeba, the same place where Hagar, Abraham’s slave, also found a way of hope from no way out. This was the same place where Hagar cried to God and prayed in despair. She had reached the end of her rope. That’s when God provided her with water and a vision for the possible, when she sat down and stopped struggling. Elijah lived an amazing life, seeing God’s work firsthand as few others have. Yet, even someone as great as Elijah needed times of rest and solitude, where God could meet him alone, to give him guidance and renewal.

This is so counterintuitive to what our culture tells us. One common saying we have is “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.” I am not against trying hard. Yet, there is a balance that we often miss when we always try so hard. We forget in our trying hard that rest is important for our creativity to flow. Rest is important for us to connect with the source of life and love. Rest is also important for us to be able to pay full attention to our present moment and to God’s presence in our lives. We become easily distracted and easily agitated. As a former Apple and Microsoft executive, Linda Stone describes this as a syndrome called “Continuous partial attention [which] is an always on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that creates an

artificial sense of crisis. We are always in high alert. We reach to keep a top priority in focus, while, at the same time, scanning the periphery to see if we are missing other opportunities. If we are, our very fickle attention shifts focus. What's ringing? Who is it? How many emails? What's on my list? What time is it in Beijing?" Even those of us who are retired are affected by this.

The ancient practice of Sabbath keeping has become rare in our day and age for at least two reasons. First, we have a sense of freedom that we can have our Sabbath any day of the week. It does not have to be Sunday. But in practice this freedom has worked against us because now most of us don't keep the Sabbath. The second reason for not keeping the Sabbath is being on the go all the time or being busy. We are either entertained all the time or working all the time. It is hard to just be without all the stuff that keeps us busy and feeling that we are really important. Working with a public charity, Wayne Muller regularly moves between the spacious offices of wealthy donors, the crowded rooms of social service agencies, and the simple homes of poor families. "Remarkably, within this mosaic," he notes, "there is a universal refrain: *I am so busy.*" For despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, most people do not find their work light, pleasant, or healing. "Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation" because busyness and fatigue make us unable to draw from the deep wisdom that is available. (Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999).

The result of this kind of busyness is that we neglect our true spiritual rest and become unable to deal with our inner work. One author, Barbara Brown Taylor, talks about this in her book, *Leaving Church*, and calls it Sabbath sickness. Having to face our inner feelings and fears is not an easy task because we are trained in our culture to keep busy so that we never have to deal with these issues.

In his book, *Beyond Words*, Frederick Buechner notes that, "When Jesus comes along saying that the greatest commandment of all is to love God and to love our neighbor, he too is asking us to pay attention. If we are to love God we must first stop, look, and listen for [God] in what is happening around us and inside us. If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces." This kind of attentiveness takes time and a sense of ease without the rush of everyday life.

In the guide to her book, *Practicing the Faith*, Dorothy Bass writes, "What would you like to be able to say when someone asks, 'How was your day?' How do you usually answer this question? Deliberately? Vaguely? Why? When does your day begin? In the Bible, the day begins at sundown (Genesis 1:5). That means the first part of each day passes in darkness; we rest, getting ready for the gift of light and activity. As Eugene Peterson notes, 'I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while.' God and nature go on without us, and we join the work in the morning. How might "beginning" the day in the Genesis way change the attitude with which you start and end your day? What evening hymn, prayer, or other act could help you start your day at dusk?"

Imagine this kind of shift. If we start our day with rest, knowing that rest comes first not last, knowing that taking time to be in the presence God comes before anything else. This is the wisdom that the prophet Elijah discovered on his journey of faith and vocation as a prophet with a hostile king. When he reached the end of his rope and life was so oppressive, resting in God's presence and nurturing his body with food and water were the things that kept him going. This

didn't end up benefiting only him but it also benefited the whole people of Israel. It was exactly the service he needed to give to his people.

Rest is always important but it is most important in times of trouble. It is most important when it seems like it is the last thing we should be doing. Yet, it is exactly what sustains us and helps us be mindful of God's presence and guidance in times of lack of clarity and despair.

You are invited today to the table of God's love. This is the table of rest, acceptance and nourishment. I hope that you will come being able to let go of all that is weighing you down to be filled with the joy and comfort of God's presence. May this table be a place of rest for our weary souls so that as we are nourished by the bread and the cup, we continue to work for justice and peace in our world.

The story is told about a man who challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did." "But you didn't notice," said the winning woodsman, "that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest." Amen.