

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin  
Sunday, August 29, 2021

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## 1 Kings 19: 4-9

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.

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

In the chapters of First Kings leading up to our text today, we learn about the prophet Elijah, and all the work he has done out of faithfulness to God. In Chapter 17 we are told of the miracles he performs to help a family in need. We learn of his work feeding a widow with little to eat, and making a little bit of food stretch a long way; we hear the story of Elijah reviving this same widow's son who suffered severe illness, bringing him back to life and health. And in Chapter 18, we learn of Elijah's fight to prove the singularity of the God of Israel against the worship of Baal. Baal was a god worshipped in the Ancient Near East, and in 1 Kings by the King and Queen of Israel - Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah proves the power of Yahweh by having worshippers of Baal create an offering, and asking Baal to bring fire upon the offering. When they make them ask, fire does not appear. But when Elijah does the same thing, asking Yahweh to bring fire to his offering, flames appear.

After this show of Yahweh's power, he asks the people to round up the prophets of Baal, so that Elijah might kill them, which he does. I readily admit that I find this story disturbing, and imagine that many of you might as well. This is not the way we imagine we should treat people of other faiths today, and so I wrestle with the author of 1 Kings presenting this violence enacted in the name of God as a victory. Nonetheless, it seems that this ancient story presents it as a success, alongside the miracles Elijah has performed. But it is a victory that leads to a threat on his life from Queen Jezebel, who promises to kill Elijah in retaliation. It is this threat that leads us into our passage today, in which Elijah flees for his life. Listen now for God's word to you in our scripture today.

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." **5** Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." **6** He looked, and there at his

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head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. **7** 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." **8** 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. **9** At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It's interesting to me that in our passage today, which is not today's lectionary text, but was one of our lectionary texts from a few weeks ago, we see Elijah at his lowest point. The creators of the Revised Common Lectionary did not choose Elijah's great victories to share in congregational life, but instead chose for us to consider Elijah's story as he hits rock bottom. Here we see Elijah not as the conquering prophet, but simply as a human who is scared, and feeling worthless. Jezebel's threat on his life has sent him into a tailspin, and he asks God that he might die right there. My interpretation of Elijah's emotions is not only that he feels deep anxiety and fear from Jezebel's threat, but that he also feels some meta-anxiety about his own emotions. When he says that he is "no better than his ancestors," he is likely referring to the Israelites coming out of slavery in Egypt, only to become disheartened in the wilderness, and questioning God's provision for them. My sense is that Elijah, as a prophet of the Lord, feels shame about his own fears, and the pressure he is putting on himself to be above that leads him to believe that he would be better off dead. Anxiety, fear, and shame are where we meet Elijah today, as he journeys into the wilderness, and sits under a solitary broom tree - which isn't even a real tree, but more like a large shrub. He is alone. In the harsh wilderness. Under a shrub.

As we learned in this year's Lenten series on Wilderness, this is a place of struggle, but in that struggle, the opportunity for new life. Methodist pastor Thomas R. Steagald describes the wilderness as "a place of both giving and testing, a season of provision and obedience, a time of physical weakness and even despair, but also an occasion of spiritual strengthening and vocational redefinition."

I'm drawn to Rev. Steagald's observation of wilderness as a place of vocational redefinition. Despite Elijah's prior successes, he finds himself at a turning point, both from external threats and internal anxiety, where he must either find another way to live into his calling, or die under the broom tree. Something must change.

Over the past year and half, all of us have been forced to deal with significant change. Change in the way we work and interact with one another; changes in the habits and health protocols we must adopt to keep ourselves and our communities safe. These changes are compiled on top of all of the "normal" life transitions that we already face. For college students in particular, their lives are already in a state of transition, going from high school to college, and then spending four years, which flies by, trying to figure out who they are, and what they want to do. And now they've dealt with switching to virtual classes and moving in with their parents, to going back to in-person classes, with many campus restrictions. And the hope that this semester might be "normal," only to now the fear that rising case numbers might take that away as well. It has been a challenging and chaotic time, to say the least.

One of our students described the stress of switching majors after realizing that some of her life goals had changed. Not only was she dealing with the stress of changing long term plans, but the resulting short term changes that she had to make in order to get the classes she needed.

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Knowing that class sizes are currently restricted due to COVID, her advisor warned her that she may very well not get into the classes she needed, which would then make completing her new major on time very difficult. She told me about breaking down in her advisor's office, not knowing what to do. As she was discerning her own vocational path, she was met by these unforeseen roadblocks, making the path all the more difficult. Her attempt at vocational redefinition was met with resistance, particularly because of COVID restrictions. Fortunately, she was eventually able to get into the classes she needed, but not without plenty of stress and anxiety.

I can very much relate to being in a time of transition, thinking about my own future, and worrying over what I need to do to prepare for that future. At twenty-seven weeks pregnant with my first child, the changes taking place in my body and in my family are becoming more apparent every day. Those of you who participated in the Enneagram Fruits of the Spirit Bible Study this summer will understand when I say that as an Enneagram six, worry over the future is a key feature of my personality. Our types anticipate worst case scenarios, and try to relieve our worries through preparation and planning. Naturally I have the typical anxieties of most new moms - trying to get the nursery ready, fears about childbirth, and as many moms in Memphis can relate to, hoping my baby gets a spot in daycare. Along with that, there's the pandemic, and the unknowns that it brings. What will case numbers look like in a few months? When will there be a vaccine available for children? What will the right decisions be to keep my family safe? I'm sure many of you have the same concerns.

Like Elijah, our college students, myself, and probably all of us in some way, fear that the circumstances we are living in hinder our abilities to live out our callings. But like Elijah, I think many of us also have the deeper fear that it's not only external circumstances that impede our abilities, but a distrust in our worthiness, and our own abilities to handle what life throws at us. Despite having already shown himself to be a capable prophet, Elijah becomes overwhelmed with fear and shame, believing that he is not capable of embarking on this new journey.

But when Elijah is at his lowest point, and asks that God might end his life there in the wilderness, he instead finds rest and nourishment. He falls asleep under the broom tree, and is awoken by an angel of the Lord who brings him food, and water. There in the harsh wilderness, God provides for Elijah, and does not abandon him. After eating and drinking, Elijah falls asleep again. I imagine him feeling full and sleepy after taking in this meal. Then we come to my favorite part of the story, which is that the angel brings him food and water not once, but twice. The angel comes back, wakes Elijah up again, and tells him that he must eat and drink more, otherwise the journey will be too much for him. God doesn't just give Elijah a little granola bar and tell him to be on his way. God provides abundantly, giving Elijah ample time to rest, and to eat. After this Elijah is rested and fed enough to travel for 40 days and 40 nights through the wilderness to Mt. Horeb. And here, we find echoes of the story of Moses, telling us that Elijah is not just as bad as his ancestors, like he initially believes, but rather that he is just as good and just as worthy as his ancestor Moses. For it is at this same location that Moses received the ten commandments.

Now Elijah is here, in this holy space, and hears the word of God asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Surely, God knows what Elijah is doing there. But perhaps Elijah does not fully know himself, and so God asks him to ponder this question that could apply to Elijah's current circumstances, or his vocation in general. When I imagine God asking this question of

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him, I am reminded of the Mary Oliver poem “The Summer Day,” in which Oliver famously asks the reader, “What do you hope to do with your one wild and precious life?”

What are you doing here, Elijah? What do you hope for? What is the truth inside of you that you cannot ignore?

In the quote from Parker Palmer that you heard in our preparation for worship, Palmer says that we must embrace opposites if we are to authentically live out vocations. We must recognize and trust in the gifts that God has given us, and we must equally embrace our own limitations. Elijah was forced to acknowledge his limits in the wilderness, finding himself in need of rest and nourishment. He believed that he was no longer capable of living as a prophet, but all he really needed was sleep, and food.

As we each seek to find and live out God’s calling for our lives, there will be obstacles, and there will be things that we cannot prepare for. As we come upon life’s transitions, we may experience the same fear and doubt as Elijah. This is normal. And yet, we can trust that God provides what we need. That provision may not come in the form of cakes on hot stone, but perhaps through listening to our bodies when they are telling us to rest. Perhaps through honoring the gifts we have been given by using them to serve others. Perhaps through faith that no matter what difficulties we encounter, we do not face them alone.

At the end of our first UKirk gathering of this semester on Thursday, I asked our students what they hope for this semester. Universally, they expressed hope for the health and safety of everyone, and hope that they might build a strong and loving community through UKirk. I think our students understand something crucial about what it means to live through times of transition, and to fulfill our callings from God: we cannot do it alone. Their knowledge of this truth, and desire that all might experience health and wholeness, is something that gives me hope.

Living into the fullness of both our gifts and our limitations requires trust in God and one another. Our God is one who sustains us in our journeys, offering nourishment in abundance. Thanks be to God.