

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on March 13, 2022

ELIJAH AND THE RHYTHMS OF THE SPIRIT

Go and stand before me on the top of the mountain. I Kings 19:11

Most of the last month, I have been a little out of sorts. The normal rhythm of day to day life feels a little off. I blame the owners and players of major league baseball. There is certain pattern to life. Soon after the Super Bowl ends, pitchers and catchers are supposed to report to spring training. We start to talk baseball. When you watch the first pre-season game and see the green grass in Florida, we, Western New Yorkers, can begin to hope for spring. This year the players and owners are battling over a contract and so the winter has become much longer.

Two long years of covid has caused many of us to be out of sorts. So many of the normal patterns of life have been interrupted. Parties, vacations, weddings, funerals, family reunions and a whole host of gatherings have been put off or canceled. We largely have missed out on both the highs and lows of life. The normal rhythm of life has been thrown out of kilter leaving us all a bit irritable.

Just as there are rhythms of the seasons, there is a rhythm of the spirit. Today our core story from the Old Testament is part of a narrative that demonstrates the rhythm of the spiritual life.

Just before the passage that was read this morning, Elijah experienced the greatest victory of his life on Mt Carmel. He had demonstrated the superiority of the God of Israel over the gods of Baal. This was one of the greatest triumphs of his life. Yet only a few days later he is saying that it would be better if he were dead. Instead of being happy for what had been accomplished, Elijah's joy seemed to turn to dust.

I believe that our lives are patterned after Elijah's experience. For most of us, our experience of life is not just one high after another. We do not experience an ever-growing knowledge of God. We do not sense that each day we are growing closer to God. There are many times that we experience God in a special way and then only a short time later sense the absence of God. We often experience some great human joy such as a wedding, or a once in a lifetime vacation, and a short time later we are depressed.

These fluctuating experiences may seem to make little sense, yet the common experience of faithful people is that there is a rhythm of the spirit. We can discover this pattern by looking at the experience of Elijah. In following the rhythm of the spirit, Elijah finds renewal. Elijah is an example of how to work through the down times.

The first step in spiritual renewal is withdrawal. We find Elijah far away from the center of activity. He has withdrawn to a quiet place. It is there, away from the crowds, that Elijah will find new direction.

Throughout the Gospels we find Jesus doing the same thing. Again, and again

we read of Jesus going off into the countryside or moving on to a new town or going out on the lake in a boat. Jesus knew that he could not be giving of himself all the time. He could not be in the midst of activity every waking moment. Jesus found places to be alone and recharge his batteries.

If Elijah and Jesus needed to find a place of escape how much more is this true for you and me. We cannot be active all the time. We cannot be doing for others every minute. We need to carve out space and time for ourselves to gain refreshment. The establishment of the Sabbath day was to remind all of us of our need to stop and find renewal.

The folk singer Joni Mitchell sings these words:

**My special place.
It's a place no amount
of hurt and anger
can deface.
I put things
back together there
It all falls right in place-
In my special space
My special place.**

We all need a special place for retreat. It may be a place you take walks, a room you can call your own or just a comfortable chair. It does not matter where; that space needs to be yours where you can withdraw from the world to gain refreshment.

The first thing that Elijah does when he arrives in the wilderness is sleep. When he awakes he finds himself surrounded by food and he eats. Elijah starts his journey back to spiritual wholeness by taking care of his body.

Christians are not disembodied spirits. We are both spiritual beings bound for eternity and creatures of the dust. Our spiritual health affects our bodies. Our bodies affect our spiritual life. If we are tired from lack of sleep, our spiritual life will lack vitality as well.

Thus, one means of helping our spiritual lives is taking proper care of our bodies. All the common-sense rules are true. We need to get enough sleep. When we face times of crises or increased stress, we need to make sure we get even more rest than normal. Elijah, after his wonderful victory on Mount Carmel, was exhausted and slept. So, we also need to rest and sleep. Shakespeare called sleep "**nature's soft nurse, the chief nourisher in life's feast.**"

Caring for our bodies also means watching our diets and exercising. The fitness of our bodies affects our spirits as well. When we eat bad foods and do not exercise at all our spirits tend to grow dull and depressed. While eating good foods and making our bodies move raises our spirits.

I know what some of you are thinking. This is one of those messages that I

need to hear myself. This is a “do as I say not as I do” section of the sermon. I realize all too often it is easy to put off caring for our bodies. There are so many other things we need to do. Yet we have to remember that each part of our lives affects the others. When we neglect our bodies, our spiritual life will eventually suffer.

After Elijah has been refreshed through rest and food, his spirit is fed by the presence of God. God tells Elijah to **Go and stand before me on the top of the mountain.** Elijah needs to receive an experience of God.

During the 12th century, St. Bernard offered this advice to his fellow Christians.

If then you are wise you will show yourself as a reservoir rather than as a canal. A canal spreads abroad water as it receives it, but a reservoir waits until it is filled before overflowing, and thus without loss to itself communicates its superabundant water.

Bernard's advice is something we Protestants need to hear. Many of us have a canal like faith. We have concentrated often on doing. Most of our sermons and Sunday school lessons focus on doing something for God. We read the Bible most of the time with an eye for what our job as Christians ought to be. There are a variety of ways that people have tried to do for God. Some have focused on the great commission to make disciples of all nations. Others have spent vast amounts of energy on helping the less fortunate. Just think of the hospitals, schools and social programs that were begun by Christian groups in this country.

There is nothing wrong with acting out our faith. But there is a danger. The danger is that by focusing on activity we can lose God. Spiritual burnout occurs when we are so focused on doing that we forget to seek renewal from God.

In calling us to be reservoirs, St. Bernard turns us away from the results of our faith to its source who is Christ.

I grew up in the suburbs of New York City. For almost sixty years there have been over 8 million people living in that city. Eight million people need a lot of water to drink and bathe in. Thus, supporting the water supply there are dozens of man-made reservoirs in the surrounding countryside. My family lived forty miles north of the city and yet we had many of these reservoirs near us. The function of these man-made lakes is to receive water. When the spring rains come and the snow melts the water runs off and is captured by the reservoirs. The primary function of the reservoir is to receive and hold water.

When St. Bernard tells us to be reservoirs, he is telling us to be concerned with receiving God and his love into our lives. He calls on us to focus on becoming spiritual reservoirs of God's presence and love.

The means we are to take time in our lives to seek God. We need the spiritual food, which is the love of Christ. This means taking time for worship and prayer. We are to come to worship each week and pray each day not out of a sense of duty. We are not coming to do something for God. Rather we are to worship and pray because

God has promised to care for us. He has promised to feed us with his perfect love.

God has promised to feed our souls with his grace, love and forgiveness. We have an inner hunger for his presence. Our spirits will starve without the food of his love.

Elijah came and stood before God and in his "still small voice" God spoke to Elijah's heart. So, we too need to take time to seek God. We need to fill our reservoirs with his love.

Finally, after withdrawing from the world, caring for his body and feeding his spirit, God gave Elijah a new task. He was told to go and anoint a new King over Syria. Elijah was not allowed to remain forever away from the world. He was refreshed for renewed work for God.

Thus, we too, when we have been refreshed, are given new tasks to accomplish for God.

The experience of Elijah, I believe represents the rhythm of the spirit. We withdraw, we find renewal and then we reenter the world. This rhythm is found on many levels. It occurs on the grand scale as with Elijah where a great victory leads to a down time of renewal. But this rhythm is also present in our week. We work Monday to Friday. Saturday is for catching up on rest and recreation. Sunday is a time for renewing our relationship with God. Each day too should follow this rhythm also. We need times of action, rest and prayer to keep our lives in balance.

I believe that much of the unhappiness in the lives of men and women today is that we have forgotten this essential rhythm of life. We can so over schedule ourselves that we do not take time for retreat, rest, exercise and prayer. Each one of these elements is like a cylinder in a car's engine. If one cylinder is not firing our lives will not be as effective as they are meant to be.

When we read the New Testament, we find Jesus following the same rhythm in his own life. We find Jesus healing in the midst of a town, but then withdrawing for sleep and prayer before returning to his mission. As we begin to leave the pandemic behind, may we relearn this rhythm of life shown by our Lord and follow it in our own lives. May we remember to –

Go and stand before me on the top of the mountain.