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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 14, Series B
Saturday, August 7th, 2021
Sunday, August 8th, 2021

Sermon: Too Much
Texts: 1 Kings 19:1-8

Focus: God strengthens us for the tasks he calls us to accomplish.

Function: That they would be encouraged in the midst of the trials of life.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it” (SC, Explanation of the Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*“I struck the board and cried, ‘No more; I will abroad...’”*¹ Those are the opening lines of

George Herbert’s poem, “The Collar,” which we have reprinted for you as a bulletin insert.

Herbert was an Anglican priest and poet in the 17th century. The poem recounts Herbert’s frustrations in the ministry and his desire to call it quits. “No more! I’m done. I’m outta here.”

The title of the poem, “The Collar,” is, of course, a pun. For Herbert wears a clergy collar as part of his liturgical vestments for leading worship. Yet he also feels as though the life of a pastor is itself a restraint, like a dog collar or prison shackles. (Later in the poem, he calls the ministry a “cage” and “rope of sands.”)

Yet George Herbert was not the first pastor to become overwhelmed by the duties, expectations, and even his own failings in the Office of the Holy Ministry. Nor would he be the last. In our Old Testament lesson today, we find the prophet Elijah at the end of his rope. He is tired, afraid, and more than just a little bit depressed. Elijah is a refugee running for his life and

¹ George Herbert, “The Collar,” Cited at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44360/the-collar>

seeking asylum in the southern wilderness of Judah. He himself is an Israelite from the northern kingdom of Israel, fleeing the wrath of the wicked Queen Jezebel, who is intent upon assassinating him.

Like George Herbert, Elijah has had enough. He's done! Enough already! He begs God to just let him die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4, ESV).²

Elijah seems to be suffering from what we call ministry "burnout." Burnout is a very real state of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion. Elijah is overwhelmed by work, disappointed in people's *response* to his work, and hopeless that things will improve. He is full of self-pity and has lost his sense of the call. And he feels utterly, completely *alone*. As he says in a later scene: "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away" (19:10, 14).

All of this seems incredible. After all, Elijah has just defeated the prophets of Baal in a spectacular showdown at Mt. Caramel. The LORD God, Yahweh, had answered his prayer by fire and consumed his offering—animal and altar—even though he drenched the sacrifice with water. The prophets of Baal (and of Asherah) could not do the same, and so the people of Israel slew the prophets of Baal. They repented and returned to God with the glorious cry, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God" (18:39).

And yet, despite his seeming triumph, Elijah was disappointed. Perhaps his reformation was short-lived. Or maybe he was angry that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel did not repent as

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

well. Queen Jezebel was infuriated by Elijah's success and vowed to kill him within 24 hours. So despite his success, Elijah became afraid and fled for Judah.

Our greatest failures often come immediately upon our greatest successes. Pride goes before a fall (Prov. 16:18). The exhaustion of victory can be overwhelming—too much. Elijah had won the battle, but he was losing the war.

“It is enough,” he prayed (19:4). It's too much! I can't take it anymore, Lord. So why don't you just put me out of my misery and let me die?

Have you ever felt that way—that life is just too much? No matter what you do, nothing seems to make a difference. No matter how much you pray, nothing seems to change. You're still worried, afraid, anxious, depressed, sick, or hurting. Will it ever end? Does God even hear me? Does he even care?

Many things in life seem to be more than we can bear: going through divorce or a custody battle; fighting cancer when the cure (chemo) feels worse than the disease itself; showing up to work everyday for a thankless job with an overbearing boss; trying to stay afloat financially when you are drowning in debt; or grieving the loss of a spouse or child who has died. When you are bereft and bewildered, at the end of your strength and resources, sometimes all you want to do is die. Perhaps you have not contemplated outright suicide, but you have wished that God would just kill you to put you out of your misery. You don't want to be here anymore. You just want to go to sleep and never wake up. Please God, just let me *die*.

Then, to make matters worse, your problems are compounded by platitudes spoken by well-meaning Christians who just want to cheer you up. “What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.” “They're in a better place.” “Smile, Jesus loves you.” I become infuriated whenever

I hear such nonsense. After my mom and dad died just 10 months apart, I fell into a very deep, dark place spiritually and emotionally. Nothing comforted me. Everything that people said or tried to do for me seemed at once to be both “too much and not enough,” as I wrote in my journals. Don’t ever speak in platitudes to somebody who is struggling. Or, as Kenneth Haugk once wrote, “Don’t sing songs to a heavy heart” (cf. Prov. 25:20).³ The Bible says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). It does no good simply to tell a hurting person to “snap out of it” or “cheer up.” Rather, *weep* with those who weep. If you don’t know what to say, then don’t say anything at all. Instead, sit with them in silence and cry.

Many well-intentioned Christians have tried to encourage a brother or sister by saying, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” But that’s not actually true. The Bible never says that. I think that this saying, “God never gives you more than you can handle,” is inspired by a misreading of something Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Pay close attention to what Paul actually writes here: “will not let you be *tempted* beyond your ability.” He never says that God will never give you more than you can handle. In fact, God gives me plenty of situations that I cannot handle on my own. By myself, it is too much. If I try to stand in my own strength, I will fall. But “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Only God can uphold and uplift me.

That is precisely what happens for Elijah. God comes to help him in his greatest need. Yahweh sends an angel to strengthen the broken-down, broken-hearted prophet. The angel

³ Kenneth C. Haugk, *Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 2004).

attempts to rekindle Elijah's flame and put some fire in his belly. Instead of continued burnout, God wants to set Elijah's heart on fire.

So the angel wakens him with a gentle touch and gives him some bread and water. "Arise and eat," the angel says. So Elijah eats and goes back to sleep. Sometimes a good meal can help to restore the soul. (*Aside*: I don't encourage you to stress eat. That's how you will get fat like me.) There's a reason why people refer to Southern cooking as "soul food." Or why we call Mom's old recipes "comfort food." As the Psalmist says, God gives "wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Ps. 104:15).

The angel comes again and rouses the sleeping prophet: "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you" (1 Kings 19:7).

Did you catch that?! "The journey is too great for you." The Hebrew word (**br"**, *rav*) for "too great" in verse 7 is the same one used by Elijah when he says he's had "enough" in verse 4. God actually *agrees* with Elijah that it's more than he can handle. It's too much. It's *more* than he can handle. The journey *is* "too great."

So what does God do? He sends the angel a second time to give him food and drink: a little bit of bread and a little bit of water. And Elijah "arise and ate and drink, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God" (v. 8). 40 days is a long time. The actual journey from Beersheba to Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, should only have taken about two weeks.⁴ Apparently, Elijah took his time. 40 is a significant number in Scripture and may represent a time of preparation for the prophet's next divine encounter. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights before he began his public ministry. And, just as

⁴ Walter A. Maier III, *1 Kings 12-22* (St. Louis: CPH, 2019), 1437-38.

Elijah was strengthened by the angel of the Lord, so also Jesus was strengthened by angels after his temptation in the wilderness and before his arrest in the garden (Matt. 4:11; Luke 22:43).

And Jesus strengthens us in our suffering and sorrow. Like Elijah, we cry out that life is “too much.” The journey is “too great” for us. We cannot bear the burden of our sin, sorrow, and disappointment. So Jesus bears it for us. He takes our cross upon his own shoulders and carries them to Calvary, the new mountain of God, where Christ died for us. And then he bids us, “Arise and eat,” offering us a little bit of bread and a little bit of wine—his own body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. The Lord’s Supper is not much to look at. But it is a miraculous meal. And in the strength of that food, you can make it through life with the cross of Christ before you and Jesus by your side.

That doesn’t mean that life is easy. It’s not. But God is with you every step of the way. His grace is sufficient for you, and his strength is made perfect in your weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

At the very end of George Herbert’s poem, “The Collar,” he comes to a sudden realization—a spiritual awakening. He writes:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
 At every word,
 Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
 And I replied *My Lord.*

In the end, Herbert didn’t call it quits. He put his collar back on and resumed his ministry.

Elijah didn’t call it quits either. For on the slopes of Mt. Sinai, he heard a “still, small voice” (v. 12), speaking the Word of God, telling him the truth, and calling him back to ministry.

Today God speaks to you and feeds you. No matter what you face, he will strengthen you for the journey ahead. Yes, it is too much for you; but it's never too much for Jesus. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.