

A sermon preached for Zion, North Branford
August 8, 2021
Text: 1 Kings 19:4-8, John 6:35, 41-51
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

We are tired. The COVID-19 pandemic has been exhausting-physically, emotionally, and spiritually as well, and it isn't over yet. In the early days, we worried about everything. We sanitized our groceries, quarantined our mail, bought all the hand sanitizer that was available, and rarely left home. Anxiety about getting sick, grief over the countless lives lost and the stress of trying to keep up with jobs, school, and families in the midst of ever-changing recommendations and regulations has left us worn out. Just when we thought things were getting back to normal, the Delta variant raised its ugly head and brought uncertainty about what this fall and might look like. One writer likened our current circumstances with to having run the 26 miles of a marathon only to be told that you have 10 more miles to go. It's no wonder that people are quitting their jobs and staying away from the things they used to do. They've run out of steam and can't do another thing.

In today's reading from 1st Kings, we see the prophet Elijah in a similar state of exhaustion. Elijah had been through so much. He survived three years of severe drought, and a battle with the 450 prophets of Baal, before learning that Jezebel ordered that he be killed. He fled for his life. Now in the wilderness, Elijah tells God that it is too much. "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life." You'll notice that it is when Elijah comes to the end of his own strength that he learns not to underestimate the power of God. And he learns not to underestimate the power of rest and refreshment.

After pouring out his heart to God, Elijah falls asleep. He is awakened by an angel who commands him to eat. He sleeps again before waking once more to the angel telling him to eat again so that he will have strength for the journey ahead. Refreshment, rest, and food for the journey. The passage tells us that Elijah was able to go 40 days on the power of that heavenly feast and that holy rest.

We can't run on empty. We can't care for others unless we have taken care of ourselves.

This is why flight attendants tell us to put on our own oxygen mask before helping the others in our care.

In my training as a disaster chaplain, I learned about the phases of a critical event. In the impact stage, the focus is on survival and “riding it out” or, if evacuated, watching from a distance. This phase may last from minutes to days. All involved experience increased distress and a sense of loss of control. During the ‘heroic’ phase, folks begin to come out of their homes or local shelters. Those who evacuated make their way home. First responders work to mitigate the chaos. People experience shock or relief, along with increased anxiety, and anger. In the honeymoon phase, the focus is on search and rescue and meeting physical needs. Community cohesion is high during this phase. A “we’re all in this together” mentality rapidly develops after disasters.

After this phase, begins the long process of recovery: cleaning up, tearing down, and rebuilding. This is the most emotionally draining phase of the disaster life cycle. The disruption of “the normal” begins to wear people down and many may question their faith and religious beliefs. There are intermittent periods of disillusionment before reconstruction is complete. These phases of a disaster can take years.

I tell you all this because these are the stages of a disaster that disrupt lives after a singular event like a tornado or a hurricane. In the case of a pandemic like we’ve been going through, the initial event lasted for well over a year. We have seen community cohesion and the heroics of essential workers and medical personnel. And we’ve been on a long roller coaster ride of all the emotions that come with a singular disaster- the shock, the anger, anxiety, the hope, the doubts, and so much grief. The thought of another wave coming at us can feel like a tsunami.

In the Gospel today, Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread of life that has come down from heaven for them. Jesus, who told those who had been trampled down, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest....learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Rest for our souls, and the bread of life. Refreshment and food for the journey. How desperately we need all that Jesus offers.

If you are feeling worn out with all that has happened in the past 18 months, if you are feeling anxiety about what is to come next, you are not alone. If you are feeling like Elijah, that it is all too much, you are not alone. So I ask you, who are your angels? Who are the ones in whom you can confide? Who

are the ones that encourage you and allow you to be vulnerable? Who will urge you to rest and be renewed? I urge you to find a loved one, a friend, or a professional and share your feelings.

Listen to your angels. Pour out your troubles to God as Elijah did, and rest, rest, rest. Find what nourishes you physically and spiritually; good clean meals, poetry, art, music, and scripture, time with loved ones, and especially find time to be still in the presence of Jesus. Make space in your life for recreation- to be re-created.

We never journey alone. In good times and in anxious times, Jesus is with us. His very name means 'God with us.' We can turn to God in Christ for the strength and the grace to make it through day by day. There we will find rest for our souls and food for the journey.