

7/17/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl! We are glad for each person who is joining us today for worship this morning on Zoom or here in the sanctuary.

This is a day when we are particularly grateful for the air-conditioned sanctuary.

For the next several weeks, we would like to focus our attention on mental, emotional, and spiritual wholeness.

We chose those words intentionally. I believe mental health, emotional health, and spirituality very much overlap and wouldn't know how to talk about one without implications for the others.

These are topics that we often don't know how to address in church very well, but part of the human condition and journey of life is facing seasons of grief, distressing emotions, or feeling God's absence.

We come together as a worshipping community sharing the faith that the Spirit of Christ is here, and is moving to form us into more loving partners of God even as so many headlines we read feel heartbreaking.

In contrast to that, what opportunities for service and celebration do we have? We'll open that time now.

As a call to worship, let us prayerfully read words taken from Psalm 130 together:

PRAYER OF INVOCATION – PSALM 130

Leader: I cry out to you from the depths, Lord

People: My Lord, listen to my voice!

Leader: Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

People: I hope, Lord

Leader: My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise.

People: My whole being waits for my Lord—

Leader: More than the night watch waits for morning;

All: Yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

Lord,

In the morning light we give thanks for your renewed mercies.

We gather in the hope of encountering your presence and love amid this community and receive a word that we might each find the strength to go on our way in faithfulness.

We thank you for the presence of your loving Spirit, and the life-power of your resurrected Son.

Amen

MORNING PRAYER

– in this morning's prayer I'll pause for just a few moments at two different points in the prayer – one for us to bring to mind and offer prayers for those we know who suffer with mental illness and the other time for those who have physical ailments.

God, we thank you for this Sabbath day, for this time of worship and learning and fellowship. We thank you for each person here; for the gifts, the questions and the ideas we bring, for the experiences, the lessons learned, the certainties and the doubts that are present in each person. And I thank you, God, for the ways you honor and love each one of us.

Loving God, you are our creator, our redeemer, our sustainer and healer. You understand us and you know what we need and what we long for. By the movement of your Holy Spirit and through your people, you lead us to what we need, you comfort and heal us. We don't always see or know your presence with us, but it's there, nonetheless. Help us to listen carefully and to watch steadfastly for you in our everyday lives, whether we're rejoicing or struggling, to recognize that you are always with us.

O God, we confess that we DO struggle and we do need you. We pray for those who suffer from anxiety, depression, or other mental or emotional illnesses. We pray for those who feel particularly isolated or lonely and struggle quietly, who then have the additional burden of secrecy or shame. May they know your comfort and love. We ask for your presence in each situation. In these quiet moments, we bring to mind those we know and love who need your healing touch. Hear our prayers, Lord...

We pray for those whose need is for physical healing. We thank you for the successful heart transplant that Diana Schunn has had and we ask for continued success and healing for her. Be with her family as they support her through the coming weeks and months. We pray for others whose need is for physical healing, those whose struggle is with cancer or covid or other physical ailments. Be present in their healing and also with those who care for them. Give your strength and patience, your compassion and tenderness to each one. Hear our prayers now, Lord...

We pray for our loved ones and all the residents and those who care for them at Bethesda, at Schowalter, at Kidron-Bethel, at Paramount and the many other nursing homes where so many of our elderly live. Give them your comfort and your peace.

Dear Lord, we thank you for the many weeks of successful camping experiences already this summer – we ask that you would be with Myra and Rosie, Lizzie and Darla and all the others who'll be attending and working at Camp Mennoscah this week. Keep them safe in this heat. Help them to learn to know Jesus and how to follow him as his disciples.

Be with us now as we continue to worship together. Bless us and all who are worshipping – may your Holy Spirit move among us that we may become more like you and share your love. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – please stand. Bless these gifts of money, O God. And bless ALL the gifts that you have given us and that we return to you with gratitude and humility. Amen.

PROVISION FOR THE JOURNEY

1 Kings 19:1-18

For the next few weeks, we are looking at what it means to find mental, emotional, and spiritual wholeness. This wholeness is God’s loving desire for us, but it doesn’t change the fact that many of us struggle at different times of our lives.

According to a New York Times newsletter, the percent of American adults taking prescription medication for mental health has increased from about 16% to nearly a quarter during the pandemic.¹

One Christian leader and thinker recently wrote that we are in a time of collective trauma. We are caught in the dilemma between being informed about what is happening in the world and therefore feeling down, or trying to stay ignorant and numb to it all. The challenge is to move beyond either numbness or a depression in order to continue doing what we know in our hearts to be right.

I have had these topics on my heart for a while, because struggle with anxiety and depression has been part of my own life both in childhood and in adulthood. Some of my words will reflect what I’ve learned in my own journey.

In the Christian community as well as the culture at large, emotional or spiritual struggle is often stigmatized. We hear the messages that if you just pray or have enough faith, or believe that “everything happens for a reason,” then you will snap out of it. If you are struggling then you must not be trusting God.

Mental health is of course a very broad topic, and people struggle for all kinds of reasons. Genetics plays a role, just like it does for physical health conditions.

Regardless of how you were conditioned by your genes, childhood, or wounds, all of us do well to pay attention to our emotional and spiritual well-being, just as the same imperative to care for your physical health applies across all ages and types of bodies.

The biblical witness tells us that to be human is to have a wide range of emotions ranging from joy to sorrow to anger or to fear. The distressing emotions are not good or bad, but part of being human. To have distressing emotions is never presented as a sin.

Biblical heroes such as Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Job had dark thoughts or asked to die. Paul reports being overwhelmed to the point of despairing of life itself (2 Cor 1:8).

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/11/briefing/declining-mental-health.html>

Contemporary teachers such as Henri Nouwen and Parker Palmer went through their own seasons of despair.

Next week, I'll reflect more on grief and loss through one of the psalms. Today, through the story of Elijah, that God meets us in those moments when it's all "too much."

ELIJAH'S STORY

Many of us remember Elijah as the prophet that won a showdown against the prophets of Baal. In this contest, both sides set up altars and prayed for the god they worshipped to send fire.

The prophets of Baal wailed an awful long time, with no answer. Elijah's prayer to Yahweh, the God of Israel, was answered with a fire that burned up the sacrifice.

Elijah literally had a mountaintop-experience, a huge victory. He might have thought that this victory would begin a revival and reform of Israel.

But these were the days of the wicked King and Queen Ahab and Jezebel. Those hopes come crashing down when Elijah finds out Jezebel's plans to kill him, and he has to flee. He is in political exile.

He turns out to be a distance runner, running from the northern part of Israel down to the southern border of Judah. Then he goes a day's journey into the desert, and finds a bush probably like that one in the picture to rest under.

This is the point of despair for Elijah. He prays to God that he can die. "It's too much, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Already, Elijah has had several powerful emotions. As he fled, he was afraid. Now out of the reach of Ahab and Jezebel, he is burned-out and depressed.

The statement "I am no better" implies shame. It's not clear if this is guilt from the bloodshed of the prophets of Baal or his awareness of his own sin and flaws in a general sense.

Either way, we have a pretty dramatic swing from the bold and triumphant Elijah just a chapter ago, when he won the showdown with the prophets of Baal.

Elijah falls asleep, and whether in a dream or awake, God appears to Elijah through an angel offering bread and water. Elijah eats and drinks, and lays down again. Perhaps it's physical exhaustion or depression.

However, the angel touches him a second time: "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." This provision is what Elijah needs. It is his food for the journey. It is meager provision – barley cakes are not fine dining, but it is enough.

Perhaps you can give a testimony of God meeting you at a point of great need. Not in a way that removed the pain, but in a way that gave you strength for the journey. Elijah can journey on the strength of that food for forty days. Those must have been pretty incredible barley cakes.

[SLIDE: MAP]

You can see on the map Elijah's full journey, all the way from the north down to Mount Horeb.

This is a place that Bible readers have seen before. Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. It is the place where Moses met God in the burning bush. It is the mountain where Moses received the stone tablets of the Law.

Scholars believe that "Yahweh," the personal name of Israel's God was associated with the region of this mountain. I guess Elijah picked a good place to go on a spiritual pilgrimage to.

Apparently, Yahweh isn't used to getting that many visitors, because once Elijah reaches the mountain, God asks him: "Why are you here?"

This simple question leave to the imagination whether God is annoyed at being bothered or if these words are an invitation to Elijah to define his quest. Elijah's answer shows that he is still in despair as well as loneliness: "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Earlier Elijah had asked God to take away his life, and now he complains about other people taking his life, but hey, when you're having a bad day, who expects you to be consistent?

ELIJAH'S FEELINGS

God never condemns Elijah for having strong feelings. The book of psalms contains many expressions of pain, anguish, and anger. We have permission to feel what we feel.

In fact, the illness of our culture is to think that we can remove suffering from the human experience, and then we pathologize pain. We tell people if you have pain then there must be something wrong with you.

It is certainly possible to be so overwhelmed with distressing emotions or thoughts that seem out-of-order, that you need to seek the help of a therapist or doctor. But for many of us, whether or not you would seek clinical help, the challenge is to be present to our emotions and our pain, to find our center in which God is with us and we are deeply loved.

THE LORD "PASSES BY"

What happens next is that God tells Elijah to get ready while God will pass by. This passage is in the same kind of tradition as the story of Moses being allowed to see God's "back."

So a number of things happen that are more typical of "theophanies" or moments when God makes an appearance.

There is a windstorm that breaks up big boulders. Wind by the way is the same word in Hebrew as "Spirit." But this is not where God shows up.

There is an earthquake, like the earthquake when Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 19:18 says: "*Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.*"

But this is not where God shows up either.

The third portent is fire, like the fire just mentioned or the fire of God that consumed Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel. But God is not in the fire either.

Isaiah 29:6 says: *"the Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire."* There you have it all.

But the Elijah story defies normal expectations of what God is like.

The last event is a "still, small voice" as it is called in the King James Version. A literal translation of the Hebrew is "sound of thin silence." Unfortunately, I didn't find anything about whether Paul Simon got his inspiration from 1 Kings 19.

Maybe it's poetic language. Or maybe it's like a faint whisper, in the calm after the storm. A whisper that you can only hear if everything else is silent.

In the noise of our lives and often the noise of our many thoughts and emotions, we are often in need of moments of silence.

I don't know if I've ever heard pure silence. There are always other sounds that fill the space. Sounds you don't normally notice. The activity of the mind that you normally are less aware of.

Practices such as prayer, contemplating scripture, solitude, gardening for some, meditative walking or running for others – whatever you have found that works and can be integrated into your life – serves the purpose of conditioning ourselves to be more aware of our own souls, and more likely to be present to God, whenever God happens to show up.

But in my experience, God showing up has always been unpredictable, and never because I was doing the "right thing."

CONCLUSION TO ELIJAH STORY

After all that, one wonders if Elijah is changed. If he "gets it." The voice of God whispers the same question: "Why are you here?"

Because Elijah repeats the exact same complaint he had given before.

But there is a difference. Elijah covered his face with his cloak, afraid to look at God. He knows that God has shown up, and the point at which God has shown up.

He repeats his despair knowing that God hears. God doesn't scold him or shame him. Or say, "there there, why don't you lay down and I'll pamper you."

God says, *"Go, return on your way..."* Well, God says more than that, but just the first couple of words are striking. "Go, return on your way."

You've received strength for the journey. You've heard the whisper of God's voice. Now you can keep going.

Elijah is to anoint three people (this word “anoint” is where we get the term “messiah”): two kings including the successor to Ahab, and a prophet to apprentice with Elijah and later replace him. The final word is that God has reserved 7000 people in Israel that do not worship Baal. All is not lost, and Elijah is not alone as he thinks.

The specific instructions remind us that God works in the particulars and messiness of human history. Especially since there will be more violence.

Whatever we do with that, the story leaves us with several impressions:

- God meets Elijah at his point of great need and provides strength for the journey
- The presence of God is made none to Elijah in the silence.
- Elijah discovers he is not alone, and God sends him “on his way again.”

CONCLUSION

The question is how to translate these impressions to our own lives, with the conviction that God deeply loves us and desires us to be whole in spirit, soul, and body.

Our central task is to remember who we are. Each of us is a beloved child of God, forgiven and embraced for your intrinsic worth just because you are you.

We have to come to know this center, the trustworthy inner voice that matches God’s voice.

This can be challenging when we are distracted by many things, and feels especially difficult if you are in distress.

How do we do this? Here are some thoughts.

Embrace both joy and pain as being part of life, including a life of faith.

Remember that distressing thinking patterns and feelings are simply part of the mind doing it’s thing. Your thoughts and feelings are not you; you simply have thoughts and feelings, the same way you might have high blood pressure or back issues.

Your brain is not broken as much as it sometimes feels. But like physical pain, we do have to decide how to respond to it, when to seek help, how to live with it at least temporarily, and how to keep doing life.

As we learn to accept the distress we feel at times, we can learn to feel our difficult emotions rather than trying to press them down or make them go away or “figure them out” logically. (Trying to “figure myself out” is my go-to, even though it rarely is a productive exercise.) The opposite challenge is to not get caught up in the frenzy of our thoughts and feelings.

We have to learn to keep a critical distance from them, which is harder than it sounds. But with that critical distance, we have some freedom.

You can choose not to believe what your brain is saying. Maybe you give a feeling its place just long enough to recognize it and then let it go. Maybe you give space for strong emotions to find expression in a safe way. Maybe your heart is pointing you to something you must take action

about. Sometimes what feels like an immature impulse and reaction is something important within our hearts trying to get our attention.

Continually choose to heed your most trustworthy self, and the voice of God as you best discern it in the midst of other conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Like Elijah, when we find spaces of silence, we position ourselves to be more aware of God's presence. Yet at the same time, in the silence we are more aware of our own souls. And often we are afraid to face what is in our souls, so we avoid silence. We keep ourselves busy and distracted. We need the courage to be able to trust that God will be there in that space that we are fearful of.

Finally, seek the encouragement and counsel of trusted people who care about you. There are always such people. They are part of the provision God gives us to be strength for our journeys.

Do the same when you are able for those who need that support from you. This is part of being church for one another.

May each of us support one another in finding strength for the journey. May we either experience or simply trust that God is here, and that God's love holds us at all times.

BENEDICTION

May God bless each one of you

With the sound of thinnest silence in which to discover your belovedness as God's child

With strength for the journey,

With loving community to encourage you,

And with love to be an encouragement for others.