

## **Meeting Us and Carrying Us**

Matthew 11:28-30; 1 Kings 19:1-11

Faith can often feel like another weight that we carry. Our commitments at church can feel overwhelming, when we need a rest. The idea of self sacrifice for others is agonizing, when we have nothing left to give. Intense views on morality, can leave us blaming ourselves, for things out of our control. Holding onto the belief that there is a plan for our lives, can feel more hurtful than helpful when things are difficult. Religious statements can often reduce our suffering to empty platitudes. A quick proverb or slogan, to encourage us to move on. Trying to believe in a good God in the midst of suffering can feel like a horrible balancing act.

Faith in Jesus simply has to mean more. It does mean more, because while this faith we have can feel like a burden and a stumbling block, it also can give us immense comfort in our times of need. The way faith comforts us is perhaps the reason it has persevered from generation to generation for so many years. But how we wield scripture, and how we search for answers will decide whether we find belief in God to be a comfort, or an obstacle.

This morning, as with most mornings, my sermon has no answers. There is no phrase that makes hardship more bearable. There is no new point of view that takes away pain. We all have to journey through the highs and lows of humanity, without any solutions. There are simply moments where the divine enters into suffering with us. How does God show up, when times are hard?

I find a lot of comfort in scripture, because I often relate to the stories. It would be silly however, to not acknowledge the elements that I cannot relate to. In the first reading this morning, I don't think any of us can relate to the specific situation that Elijah finds himself in. Having defeated the many prophets of Baal, Elijah is forced on the run. Jezebel is going to kill him for what he has done. She and her husband Ahab have already killed all of his prophet friends. Elijah runs for his life, escaping into the desert.

After resting God has him walk 40 days to a mountain, so that he can encounter the presence of God.

None of those facts connect with my current life circumstance. I have unfortunately never had the opportunity to battle 400 prophets of a false god on a mountain. Nor has a ruler ever called for my head on a platter. I do like running, but I have never done it out of necessity, and certainly never through the desert. I definitely won't be walking for 40 days straight any time soon. Despite all these crazy, foreign things happening to Elijah, I find this story incredibly relatable and moving.

Directly after one of Elijah's greatest triumphs, comes one of his greatest hardships. His mountaintop moment turns into a desert depression almost instantly. Things are good one day, and the next they are all wrong. In his darkest moment, Elijah sleeps. A common symptom of grief, or chronic depression is sleeping excessively, or not sleeping enough. At times, I can certainly relate to these symptoms, and I imagine many of you can as well. Despite our sadness not taking place next to a broom bush (though maybe you have done this), the emotional experience of Elijah is one that we are familiar with. The sudden onset of grief and sadness. The natural coping by sleeping. These are not foreign ideas from thousands of years ago; they are realities for all humans who are suffering.

It is in these moments, that God meets Elijah in a special way. Upon waking from his slumber, Elijah finds that there is food that has been cooked for him, and water. He sleeps again. Eat and sleep and repeat.

There is a column I like in the Canadian Mennonite called "Ask Oma". People write in and get advice from Oma. It felt providential that someone wrote in this week, and Oma responded with references to both the passages we are discussing this morning. It read:

Dear Oma,

I ran out of steam after decades in the church. The pastor says God will bring comfort, meaning and transformation, but then life hits: loss and broken relationships, but also just plain fatigue. I know

others too, who, after decades in church, don't get out the door on Sunday morning anymore.

– Sleeping In

Part of Oma's response read:

I think of Elijah who also ran out of steam after an intense season of serving God. Eat and sleep, God told him, then eat and sleep some more. And then God called him to what was next and let him know he wasn't alone.

Love, Oma

Eat and sleep. And then God really lets Elijah know he is not alone, in a very special way. Elijah is led up a mountain, where he encounters the presence of God. God shows their miraculous power in the earth quake, wind, and fire. The Earth Wind and Fire if you will. Of equal importance to this display of power, is the stillness and silence. In this stillness and silence God speaks to Elijah. God tells Elijah to keep going, God gives Elijah a friend and protégé in Elisha in the following pages

It can be tempting to discard this story. We are not on the run from evil queens, God has never sent an angel to bake my bread, I have never heard a clear voice after an earthquake tell me what to do.

Yet there is so much that we can connect with in this story. It is a human experience, to be so distressed, to be mourning so much, that all we can do is eat and sleep. You can probably think of a time, short or long, where this was the state you were in. In our worst moments, when we cannot meet our physical needs ourselves, others have helped us. Friends and family instead of God's angel have cooked for us, cleaned for us, helped us get things sorted out. You can probably think of someone who helped you with your immediate needs when you were struggling.

Perhaps the hardest thing to see, is that God's presence met us in our suffering. It likely wasn't through Earth, Wind and Fire. It was more likely through a coincidental word, or perhaps the help of a person. If you can think of a time God met you in your troubles, that is great, and I

encourage you to hold onto that memory tightly. That is however not always how things go. If we are lucky, maybe in hindsight we can see God's presence. It is just as likely, and just as human, to feel like God has not met us. God feels far away when we are suffering, and there is nothing wrong with wondering if God cares at all. That feeling of abandonment echoes through scripture, and the stories of so many people. *When we experienced a pregnancy loss several years ago, I remember telling Becca "If this is God's plan, then I think God is a jerk"*. I feel some guilt about that thought, but based on the Psalms of lament that I have read, that thought is normal and human. Your story with grief might not end with a nice bow on it, like Elijah's did when he heard God's distinct voice. And it doesn't have to. If you ever journal, or reflect, or converse about faith, I would encourage you to maybe ask these questions on the screen.

1. Was there a time where you were so distraught, that you could only manage to eat and sleep?
2. In your time of need how were your immediate needs met? Who supported you?
3. Looking back, can you see any ways that God met you in your suffering?

If that feels too difficult to dive into, but you want to explore these ideas, come talk to me sometime, I think I have a small reflection on each of these questions, but I am not sure the sermon time is the place to talk about them.

If any of this feels convoluted, or maybe even distressing, discard any notion of responsibility to find God in your past or present tragedies. This is not a message pushing you to "look for the positives". That is not my intention, and it is certainly not the intention of a God who enters into hardship. When you reflect on past, or present hardships, I hope that three main things ring true. You are loved. You are enough, even if you are just getting by. God wants to meet you in your struggle. While I want to encourage reflection, give a nice sermon, and maybe talk about scripture, words are often useless when things are hard. In fact words can hit us in

the wrong way, they can make us feel brushed aside, or guilty, or hurt. When we consider the suffering around us, and within us, maybe this stuff about Elijah, and the presence of God actually harms us more than helps us. I am sorry if that is the case, and if it is, I encourage you to go back to the three main things. You are loved. You are enough. God wants to meet you in your struggle.

Because this faith we carry is not to be a heavy burden. The good news of Jesus brings healing and comfort to the weary. The good news does not call for our humanity and pain to be swept away by saying “the right thing”. The good news is that Jesus invites all who are weary and burdened to come. Draw near to Jesus not out of obligation, or to have the right answers. Draw near to Jesus to try and find rest. Learn from Jesus, his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Jesus carries the heavy burdens of this life for us. Jesus doesn’t do this by miraculously taking pain away. Unfortunately for the time being hardship remains. We as the hands and feet of Jesus do this. We help others in their time of need. We help lift their burdens. Chances are, you have tried to help others, and you have been helped by others yourself.

In this life we will all face various difficulties. These difficulties are all unique. How we process them will be unique. There is no explanation, anecdote, or answer that makes things good. I have been guilty in the past of trying to “make things better”, to try and cope with my own discomfort. When I was a kid, it was by always trying to make someone who is crying laugh. With myself and loved ones, I have tried to rush the grieving process along. I have learned that things are just not good sometimes, that feelings of sadness and despair do not need to be “fixed”. They just are. The timeline before things get a little better changes between everyone. If we see someone struggling, with Jesus as our example, hopefully we can be a safe place for the weary. If we are struggling may we feel grace instead of pressure. Comfort instead of obligation. Space to grieve, instead of a hurriedness to heal. You are loved. You are enough. God wants to meet you. Let’s help carry each other’s burdens. Join me in prayer.

God who enters into all pain and distress. Who came to earth, and experienced the fullness of human suffering. Be with us this week. Whether our heart is broken with sadness for ourselves, or broken as we watch loved one's struggle. Help us to comfort one another. Keep our words comforting and helpful. Inspire actions that lighten the load. Meet us wherever we are. When there aren't words, when nothing can make things better, help us to keep going. Amen.