



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Down in a Cave”

1 Kings 19:1-15a

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The Bible is surprisingly honest about the humanity of its characters. The Elijah we meet in today’s reading is much more complicated than the prophet we meet earlier in 1 Kings. There, he’s confident and authoritative. But not here. In chapter 19, Elijah sits down under the shade of a solitary desert shrub in despair. “Oh Lord, take away my life.” (v. 4) He’s depressed; ready for his life to end.

40 million adults in the United States deal with depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>1</sup> Which means that one in five adult Americans, not counting teens, tweens and children, have felt what Elijah feels. These days, depression is an epidemic, hiding in plain sight. It touches us all.

I’ve known sadness in my life, as we all have. Sad when my first boyfriend broke up with me. Sad when my parents put our dog down. Sad when we left our first child at college. I don’t feel down very often or for very long. In fact, I’ve been teased for having a sunny, Southern California disposition! I’ve been spared the anguish of having my sadness slip into diagnosable depression. However, I have, like all of us, related to people who are depressed. My father. Various relatives, and in-laws and friends. Church members and professional colleagues. Depression is around us; whether we’re the ones experiencing the depression, or whether we’re the ones connected with those who are.

Before author J.K. Rowling wrote the Harry Potter series, she suffered from depression and battled suicidal thoughts.<sup>2</sup> She was an unemployed single mom. She lived in poverty and spent her days writing in local cafes. Rowling sought help through cognitive behavioral therapy. In the Harry Potter books she embodies her depression in the character of the Dementors; terrifying creatures that feed off other people’s happiness. They cause depression and despair in everyone unfortunate enough to meet them.

In our reading, Elijah despairs. Queen Jezebel, his personal Dementor, is out to get him. She sends Elijah a letter; “Within twenty-four hours, you’re a dead man.” Jezebel’s threat terrifies him. He runs for his life into the wilderness. We don’t know how much time passes between Jezebel’s death threat and Elijah’s death wish. It could have been days, or weeks.

What we do know is that Elijah shows classic signs of deep depression. He’s worn out and fatigued, no longer interested in life. He sleeps a lot. He forgets to eat. He complains. His view of reality is distorted. And he’s suicidal. All signs of depression.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.suicide.org/jk-rowling-considered-suicide.html>

Back in December of 2004, there was a man named Jean-Luc Josuat-Vergès.<sup>3</sup> He left his wife and son at home, and drove up into the hills with a bottle of whiskey and a pocket full of sleeping pills. Jean-Luc was 48 years old and he was depressed. He steered his Land Rover into the entrance tunnel of an abandoned mushroom farm. He got out, clicked on his flashlight and entered the tunnels of the maze-like cave of an underground farm.

The tunnels were part of a five-mile-long labyrinth of twisting passages, and dead ends. He walked down one corridor, turned, and then turned again. His flashlight battery dimmed, then died. Mud sucked his shoes off his feet. He stumbled barefoot through the maze, groping in darkness, searching for the exit. Jean-Luc was lost.

A difference between depression and normal sadness is loss of hope and a sense of personal worthlessness. Major depression can feel like falling into a grayness and numbness that compounds daily, with no end in sight. This depth of depression invades the architecture of the brain and starts translating what actually happens in the world into a false message about ourselves, a message that says we are unloved, unlovable, and unworthy.<sup>4</sup> I've seen it happen to people. Painful as it is to watch, it has to be excruciating to experience.

These days we have more tools to deal with depression than those who came before us. These days we can adjust imbalanced brain chemistry with sophisticated medication. Nearly miraculous mood adjustments sometimes happen with the right kind of therapy. Even so, there is no quick fix for depression. Getting the medication and the dosage right can be a challenge. Starting meds or tapering off can be difficult, even life threatening. Some struggle with side effects. Building a relationship with a therapist and sticking with the therapeutic process takes time and energy. There's no easy fix for depression, but it can be managed. Hope can return.

Kevin Hines knows that. In the year 2000, on a September day, Kevin – who is then 19 – takes a bus to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. He is overwhelmed by what he calls “brain pain.” His life has narrowed to just one thought: stop the pain. Like most everyone who contemplates or completes suicide, Kevin Hines does not really want to die. He just wants the pain to stop. He hopes the bus driver or a passenger will sense his anguish and ask how he is. They don't. He promises himself that he won't jump, if, as he walks to the middle of the bridge, just one person asks how he is, or shows any interest in him. No one does. And so in desperate hope of ending his pain, Kevin puts his hands on the railing, swings his feet over, and lets go. The instant his fingers leave the rail, before he is a foot into his 240 foot descent, he feels regret. At 70 miles per hour, he crashes feet first into the water. He crushes spinal vertebrae and breaks an ankle. But he survives. He wrote a book and produced a film about his journey. He now speaks relentlessly about suicide prevention and mental health. He wears a tee shirt with the logo #BeHereTomorrow.<sup>5</sup>

Living with depression can be agonizing. In deep depression many people want to be here tomorrow, but they have to fight a constant desire to make the pain stop today. Elijah fought that fight and survived it. We must not blame those who fought that fight and didn't survive. Suicide is a tragedy, not the result of moral weakness or lack of faith. In the face of suicide, faith leads us to continue to trust God's love, and that whether we live or

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Josuat-Vergès: <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/02/getting-lost-cave-labyrinth-brain/582865/>

<sup>4</sup> A line from Rev. Matt Gaventa's magnificent sermon about his father's depression and the limits of love. <https://mattgaventa.com/2014/08/17/im-through-with-love/>

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Hines: <https://www.psychom.net/kevin-hines-survived-golden-gate-bridge-suicide/>

whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8). As surely as Jesus took the pain of the world into the tomb, God is with Kevin Hines in his years of brain pain and his descent into San Francisco Bay. And God is with Elijah as he is about to drown in his pain.

God reaches some of us through pharmaceuticals, or physicians, or friends like Kevin Hines. In Elijah's day God sends a different messenger – an angel – with food for a journey and a prod to get going. For 40 days Elijah walks to the mountain where God met Moses. God waits there, with a question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Of course, God knows what he's doing there. Elijah is hiding. He seeks out a cave. Somewhere dark and hollow; somewhere that mirrors how he feels; a place to die alone.

Back to Jean-Luc and his cave. On January 21, 2005, 34 days after he first entered the tunnels, three teenage boys decide to explore the abandoned mushroom farm. They discover the empty Land Rover, with the driver's door still open. They call police, who dispatch a search team. In a chamber just 600 feet from the entrance, they find Jean-Luc. He is pale and thin, and has grown a long, scraggly beard. He is alive.

When Jean-Luc entered the tunnels with his whiskey and sleeping pills, he was thinking of suicide. "I was low, having very dark thoughts." After he emerges from the mushroom farm cave, he finds that he's regained perspective. He is happier and more at ease with his family. He begins to attend night school. He tells reporters that while he was in the dark, "a survival instinct" renewed his will to live. In the dark, he got lost, and surrendered to disorientation.

In our reading, God does not give Elijah answers. Good therapists seldom do. The depression in his brain mistranslates God's presence into something that says "I, Elijah, don't matter." But God does not give up on Elijah. "Even if your mind can't trust I am with you, I am with you; it's still true."<sup>6</sup>

Elijah hides in the cave. Outside, a great wind breaks rocks. Outside, an earthquake shakes the mountain. Outside the cave a fire roars across the landscape. And then there is silence. A sound of sheer silence. There's no clear presence, but there is the sound of sheer silence... When Elijah hears this paradoxical sound of silence he gets up. He steps outside the cave, alive.

At some time, the odds are good that we will find ourselves or someone we know in a cave of depression. Time in a hollow, dark place is occasional for some. For others, time in a cave comes with heart breaking regularity.

The hard truth is that sometimes our love, and even God's love, is not enough to keep someone tethered to this life. Some, desperate to end the pain, let go. And some, like Kevin, and Jean-Luc, and Elijah, are given a tomorrow when they can keep holding on.

Here, I speak to any whose loved ones have died by suicide. It is not your fault. It is not your fault. God's promise is that there is life after death for them. And there is life after their death for you. Trust that. As hard and tragic as it is, you have another chance at this life.

Elijah belongs to God. Jean-Luc and Kevin belong to God. The sound of sheer silence reveals God. Depression shouts "You are unloved and unlovable." God whispers "I love you, you are mine." Depression shouts "You are unworthy. You will always be unworthy." God whispers "You are valuable, priceless. I claim you. Today, tomorrow, always. I claim you, always, in a cave, on a bridge, on a cross. Always." Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Another line from Rev. Matt Gaventa's sermon about his father's depression and the limits of love.

<https://mattgaventa.com/2014/08/17/im-through-with-love/>