

ARISE AND EAT

1 Kings 19: 1-8

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We are continuing in our series that I have titled, “Thin Spaces: Encountering Glory.”

We have considered all sorts of places where the glory of God has been encountered throughout history—where beauty and love and wonder and compassion and justice have broken into our planet, where the immortal has made himself present in the lives of human persons.

At times God has been present because someone has made a place for the presence of God. Moses prepared a tent of meeting, Daniel prayed to confess his sins and the sins of his people, and Hannah asked for a child.

At times God has been present because injustice has cried out to him—as in the case of Abel, Hagar and Leah—and he has come to bring a just love.

We have seen the glory of God’s love break through in broken social systems, broken family systems and broken religious systems.

Today we are going to consider what it looks like when God’s love breaks through in a broken human system, when God’s love breaks through in a broken human being -someone who has had enough and would rather be dead than alive.

The title of our message today is arise and eat.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we sympathize with Elijah the anguished, the confused, the disillusioned, the sad, the lonely and despairing who has left his servant behind and taken a day’s journey into the wilderness that he might end his life. Have mercy on all those among us who amidst a teeming throng of oppressive thoughts, debilitating dread, and disorienting brain chemistry have come, once again to the place your glory dwells, this place of worship. May they find angels here who

will give them of your heavenly food and of the water of life that they may be strengthened for their journey. Amen

Elijah is a strange character. We are given no details about his family history or of his calling. A few words describing his appearance are given to us,

“He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist” (2 Kings 1:8)

He goes about with animal skins held together by a belt.

He bursts upon the pages of scripture with a prophetic word in 1 Kings 17 with no warning and only the most scant of details explaining who he is.

“Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, “As the LORD the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word!” Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Leave here, turn eastward.”
(1 Kings 17:1-3)

Elijah’s words are even more shocking than his appearance.

This is a dramatic statement and it would seem Elijah’s solution to the problems in Israel.

James tells us, *“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.”*¹⁸ *Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”* (James 5:17-18).

There is no sense in the text that a word of the Lord came to Elijah telling him to make this proclamation to Ahab the king of Israel, James suggests that Elijah prayed that it might not rain and it did not. There is no hint in the text that Elijah was speaking on behalf of God. As a matter of fact the typical literary formula that prophets use and that Elijah himself uses throughout his ministry is not present. The typical literary formula is displayed in 1 Kings 21:19 *“And you shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD’”*

This formula is not present in Elijah’s pronouncement to Ahab the king.

Instead, Elijah says “*As the Lord the God of Israel lives*” It would seem that Elijah has asked God that it will not rain. In his pronouncement to the king at his court, Elijah attaches the name of God to his prophetic word.

This interaction displays the character of Elijah.

- He is a daring and courageous man of faith-
- he is making pronouncements based on faith about the rain ceasing!
- he is going to the king’s court to do so, risking his life, because with such a statement the king could grow angry and have him killed.

Why would Elijah want to pronounce such a devastating curse upon his own people?

The scriptures tell us:

“There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited” (1 Kings 21:25)

Ahab and Jezebel gave themselves over to the worship of Baal. The practices of the worship of Baal are described by Howard Vos expert in historical, geographical, biblical, and archeological research in his book *An Introduction to Bible Archaeology*

“Base sex worship was common, and religious prostitution even commanded, human sacrifice was common and it was a frequent practice—in order to placate their gods—to kill young children and bury them in the foundation of a house or public building at the time of construction.”

This seems to be what is reported in the last verses of 1 Kings 16 just before 17:1 when Elijah appears in the throne room of Ahab.

1 Kings 16 says this, “*Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD the God of Israel than all the kings of Israel before him. In Ahab’s time Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub—in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun.*”

Elijah lives in a time when the name of God has been dismissed from common life, when children can be killed for the sake of financial gain or social/political advancement, when non-normative sexual practices are encouraged within God's house, when superstition is prevalent and gods from other religions are invited into the very heart of the worship of the people set apart by covenant to God.

In short, Elijah lives in very dark times, times that would grieve and overwhelm the heart of anyone who loved the God of Israel, anyone who was devoted to the name and fame of Yahweh.

The pronouncement Elijah makes, "*there will neither be dew nor rain these years except by my word*" is a direct attack against Baal—the god being worshiped by King Ahab, Queen Jezebel and the majority of Israel.

Magnus Magnusson in his book *Archaeology of the Bible Lands* explains:

"Baal, one of the sons of El (the chief god of the Canaanites), was the god of thunder and winter storms. He is also identified with vegetation and the seasonal fertility cycle...Baal is sometimes called the 'son of Dagon.' Dagon was also a god of vegetation, specifically corn, which is what this name means. . . As the summer drew to an end and the rains were due, the peasants would suffer a crisis of anxiety – would the rains come? By calling upon Baal, the rain god and encouraging his intervention..." Elijah is not just making a crazy pronouncement to show the power of God in a random way, he is very strategically displaying to the king and the nation of Israel that it is not Baal who controls the rain but Yahweh.

After this bold statement Elijah is hidden by the Lord in various ways for three years. In the third year God tells Elijah, "*Go show yourself to Ahab and I will send rain upon the earth.*" 18:1-2 When Ahab saw Elijah he said, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel? And he answered, 'I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to

me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." 18:17-19

If you are familiar with the tale you know that everyone did gather at Mount Carmel where Elijah staged the final showdown between Yahweh and Baal. In the end, Yahweh is victorious, he sends fire from heaven in a mighty final display of power that shames Baal and the prophets of Baal. All the people see this mighty act of God and they fall on their faces saying, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God" 18:39

Elijah slaughters the prophets of the false god and God sends a great rain on the earth—after over 3 years of no rain. As Elijah leaves Mount Carmel, after his victorious battle with the prophets of Baal, the text says "and the hand of the LORD was on Elijah and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel." (18:46)

- The LORD affirmed this action of Elijah—in many ways.
- By withholding the rain
- By sending fire from heaven
- By having his hand on Elijah—and giving him physical power to run faster than Ahab, who was riding in a chariot.

When Jezebel hears of what Elijah has done she sends him a message "so may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." (19:2) Elijah becomes terrified by this message. What? The guy who just slaughtered 450 prophets and stood on the mountain confronting evil and challenging the king of his nation.

We are never just one thing.

Elijah this man of unbelievable faith, is also a man who is terrified by human power and authority. So terrified that he runs for his life to Beersheba in the southern region of Judah—there he leaves his servant behind and continues for another day's journey into the wilderness.

- He sits under a broom tree.
- He is so distressed, overwhelmed and upset that he asks that he might die.
- Elijah does not make light requests of the LORD.

The last request we heard Elijah make was in 18:36-37 “O LORD, God of Abraham, Issac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me that this people may know that you, O LORD are God and that you have turned their hearts back”

- He asked for fire from heaven.
- What about the time before that? “*O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.*” He asked for a child to be resurrected from the dead.
- What about the time before that? “*There shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.*” There was no rain from heaven for over three years.

When Elijah asks that he might die—he is expecting that God will hear him and that he will in fact die. This is the prayer of a man who prays expecting God to act in the most powerful of ways.

Elijah is suicidal—he is not wanting to take his own life. But he is asking God to take his life. He is in such deep despair that he does not want to live.

Listen to the prayer of Elijah, “It is enough; now, O LORD take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”

Three thoughts seem to be on Elijah’s mind:

1. It is enough—he has reached the limit. How has he reached his limit?
He has given it his best shot. And what more could have been done? He attacked Baal at the heart of his identity—Baal the god of rains could not make it rain when Yahweh shut the heavens. He had gone to Carmel—all the people had said “the LORD he is God”—but nothing had changed. Even when they saw the uselessness of their gods they continued to worship the Baals. It is enough—means despair, hopelessness, great grief, perhaps depression.
2. Now, O LORD—take away my life. Now—in this present moment, in this pit of despair—take my life. Although he has seen the power of God—he believes that his situation is impossible—he would rather die than live his current life.

There may also be a sense that Elijah would rather have God take his life than Jezebel who has vowed to kill him.

3. I am no better than my fathers. Elijah believes his life is useless—it has no purpose. What have his fathers produced—this terrible state for Israel—a nation immersed in worship of dark and evil false deities, a nation given over to temple prostitution and child sacrifice. Why would Elijah believe he was no better than his fathers—because he had not been able to turn the tide, he was not able to make a noticeable difference even with the most amazing display of power he could imagine.

Listen to his own words, *“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.”*

It is clear from this text that Elijah is overcome by grief. Times of deep sorrow are almost always accompanied by a sense of helplessness tinged with shame.

Elijah had overcome the prophets of Baal, the nation had not changed and now he was running from Jezebel.

A painful circumstance has broken Elijah’s heart. Elijah has experienced ultimate disappointment and defeat. How many of you have experienced a broken heart, so much pain that your heart has burst because it cannot contain the sorrow—and so it must burst apart? From the text we cannot be certain if Elijah’s desire for death, his suicidal impulse is the result of deep grief or depression. He has poured out for God, he has been zealous for the Lord—and what has been the result? He is running for his life, nothing has changed, life goes on as it ever has. I grew up in a generation of young people whose musical prophet was Keith Green. He sang songs for my generation, prophetic songs denouncing the empty, superficiality of Christian religiosity, he sang us songs of hope—that we could change things, that stoked our passion and catalyzed movements.

Here are the lyrics to his song “Asleep in the Light”

*Do you see? Do you see?
All the people sinking down?
Don't you care? Don't you care?
Are you gonna let them drown?
How can you be so numb?
Not to care if they come
You close your eyes and pretend the job's done
"Oh, bless me, Lord, bless me, Lord"
You know, it's all I ever hear
No one aches, no one hurts
No one even sheds one tear
But, He cries, He weeps, He bleeds
And He cares for your needs
And you just lay back and keep soaking it in
Oh, can't you see it's such sin?
'Cause He brings people to your door
And you turn them away
As you smile and say
"God bless you, be at peace"
And all Heaven just weeps
'Cause Jesus came to your door
You've left Him out on the streets
Open up, open up
And give yourself away
You see the need, you hear the cries
So how can you delay?
God's calling and you're the one
But like Jonah, you run
He's told you to speak but you keep holding it in
Oh, can't you see it's such sin?
The world is sleeping in the dark*

*That the church just can't fight
 'Cause it's asleep in the light
 How can you be so dead
 When you've been so well fed?
 Jesus rose from the grave
 And you, you can't even get out of bed
 Oh, Jesus rose from the dead
 Come on, get out of your bed*

Keith Green died along with two of his young children in a plane crash at age 28. He sparked a movement—me and my peeps—we thought we'd change the world in Jesus' name. Look around—the world, the North American Church and our neighborhoods are in far worse shape than the ethos into which Keith sang.

My personal sense of loss over what is can gut me and bring me to my knees on most days. There is such a sense of deep sadness for those of us from my generation who hoped heaven would come close and God would come down!

I weep with Elijah in his deep sorrow. He thought he'd change his world in those 3 ½ years—but when he looks around, it hasn't gotten better—only worse, now Jezebel is hunting him to kill him.

To be clear, sadness is very different than grief or depression. Sadness may be an aspect of grief or an aspect of depression, but they are not the same.

Robin Dee Post, a recently retired clinical psychologist with over 30 years of experience in private practice, theorizes that sadness is actually a desirable and necessary emotion. “It’s an emotion we sometimes think about negatively and it actually is not, it’s a very adaptive feeling.” Being sad allows us to deal with [painful experiences and loss](#). It can be cathartic and relieve tension. “It also aids in empathy for ourselves and what we’re going through. It is also an emotion that can help us access other people’s pain and suffering.

Today you may be going through a season of sadness—remember sadness cannot be cured. Sadness makes sense in a world filled with injustice, war, inequity, poverty, displaced persons, breakdown of marriage, domestic and child abuse, and many other societal failures. Sadness is not something we should try to get past. Sadness is used by God to inform us of what is wrong in ourselves and in this world. Sadness is one way we release the terrible distress of loss. Sadness is what we should feel as a generation bombarded on social media with images of devastation, suffering and torment in our world. Sadness is an appropriate response to the global, the national, the regional, the local and the personal tragedy all around us.

“Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” (Is 53:3)—I wonder if we spend time reflecting upon and reckoning what it might have actually been like on a mundane Wednesday afternoon to be in the presence of Jesus while he walked the roadways of Galilee or Capernaum? This man of sorrows acquainted with grief makes sense of a person who was living in a nation occupied by the cruel and terrorizing Roman civilization—that made sport of crucifying unruly citizens and amidst religious leaders who had distorted beyond recognition the covenant of God with his people.

Grief and depression can look very much the same. Andrew Solomon who wrote *The Noonday demon: an atlas of depression* states, “Grief is depression in proportion to circumstance” while “depression is grief out of proportion to circumstance.”

Grief is circumstantially related whereas depression may come upon you without any real reason. It is as though your body has conquered your soul. You are a whole person, every component of your personhood is an interdependent complex. Your brain chemistry when it is out of balance has emotional, psychological and spiritual side-effects. Depression leads not only to sadness but also to a sense of the joy of living being removed.

We find Elijah in a state where all joy and purpose are removed from his life. It is not clear if this is because the grief of the complete and abject societal failure of his nation and the disgusting horror of the worship of Baal in the temple of God has overcome him, or whether he is a man who suffered from depression—that has intensified due to these circumstances.

We do know that our physical health has a direct correlation to sadness, grief and certainly depression. Elijah is exhausted, he has been on the run, he has overspent himself, he is overextended.

We do know that when we are depressed. We listen to lies—we begin to believe that we are alone, that we are isolated, that we are better off on our own and that there is no real help. Elijah certainly felt this way. Remember, Elijah says, “I, even I only am left” We may feel isolated. When we feel isolated we often respond by isolating, by withdrawing, by gutting it out on our own. Elijah has left his servant behind and continued his journey on his own. He has a sense of being deserted and completely alone.

In any case, Elijah has said “It is enough!”

Are you here today and “it is enough?”

The story of Elijah doesn’t end with his prayer asking God to take his life. Instead of taking his life, God is choosing to restore his life.

“And behold an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Arise and eat.’ And he looked and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.”

Notice that in Elijah’s depression or deep grief, but certainly unremitting sadness—God does not choose to miraculously heal him. Instead, he takes care of his physical health—he gives him some food and drink. For those of us suffering from melancholy, grief, deep sadness or depression—we need to begin by taking proper care of our bodies. Sometimes we cannot, sometimes we can hardly get out of bed. Notice God sent an angel—a messenger to care for Elijah. Church -we need to be messengers of hope, restorers of life to the broken-hearted, to the depressed, to the downcast. We need to take care of their physical needs when they don’t have the ability to get out of bed.

Elijah eats and drinks and lays down again—presumably still waiting for God to answer his prayer and take his life.

Notice what God does,

“And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, ‘Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.’”

A few significant things for those of you who are depressed, who are full of grief and sadness, who may be broken-hearted.

Notice who comes to Elijah—it is the angel of the LORD. Who is the Angel of the LORD. This is the same person that we meet in Exodus 3, who speaks out of the bush that will not burn—to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

- The Angel of the LORD is Yahweh. The veil is torn in two and God comes close, love is near—in the midst of depression, grief, sadness and deep melancholy.
- The angel of the Lord touches Elijah. He personally reaches out and physically touches him. The hand of the One who holds the universe together with a word of his mouth touches Elijah!
- He personally prepares food for him.

I don’t know about you, but this brings to my mind an image of a group of eleven men sitting around a charcoal fire eating freshly fried fish and bread. Their prophet, Jesus Christ, was taking on Satan, the power and presence behind Ba’al. These eleven men left everything to follow Jesus—family, business, home, everything! They had seen all of their dreams dashed and trampled on when in the garden of Gethsemane, a band of soldiers came to arrest their prophet. That night their prophet had agonized, deeply sorrowed and been in a state of overwhelming anguish. The journey had seemed too great for him, and how was that prophet cared for? “And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.” Luke 22:43

That night in Gethsemane when the soldiers arrested their great prophet, their messiah, the rabbi they had followed for about 3 ½ years, they ran away in fear. In John 21, Jesus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob came near to them, and he prepared a meal over a fire for them.

God showing up in the presence of lost dreams, a story turned upside down, doubt, fear, devastation, lost hope, deep grief, depression or sadness is not the unusual experience of human persons.

David wrote this in Psalm 34:

“This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. . . “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit”

When the angel of the Lord comes near Elijah, when the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob encamps around Elijah, when the God who breathes galaxies into being cooks bread on hot stones, he also says “for the journey is too great for you.” These words seem to have a double entendre based on their placement in this text. They certainly apply to the 40 day and 40 night journey Elijah is about to take, but they also relate to his current emotional, spiritual, psychological and physical state. The journey is too great for you!

Is the journey too great for you right now? Have you been suffering from post-partum depression or post-partum anxiety since the day your last child was born? Have you not recovered from the loss of a loved one? Have you chronic depression? Do you struggle to even get out of bed? Have you lost your job? Have you lost your children—they are off to college, or they have left your home in rebellion and with strife? Have you a fog of sadness that hangs over you—that is uncomfortable? Have you had enough?

Or perhaps—you would like your life to be done and you are asking God to end your life.

I want you to be very still before the Lord. I want you to still your mind, your heart, your anxious spirit, your physical body.

In this moment, I pray that you would sense the nearness of God—close your eyes. Do you see that he is placing before you the basic needs of your life—food and drink, sleep and rest. Do you sense his gentleness, the breath of the Spirit on your face as he stands so close, and says arise and eat?

In this moment I pray that you would feel the touch of God. He stands beside you right now and he touches you.

Listen for his voice—he is saying, do you hear him, “the journey is too great for you?”
Do you hear his deep love? He knows the journey is too great.

In this very moment you are held in his carrying?

What if you do not sense or feel the presence of God in this moment, and you have not for a very long time, or you never have? Our feelings of God’s presence do not save us—he does. He is your Savior, he is saving you, he is doing a hidden work.

Do you feel a loss of purpose in your life, no joy in the work of your hands, no joy in the relationships that once infused life in your very soul? Jesus speaks, “Arise and Eat?”

What does this mean? Are you constantly overextending and overreaching. Jesus says “arise and eat!” it is not time to journey it is time to feast on Christ, it is time to slow down and taste and see the goodness of God.

Despondency, despair and even doubt are normal features of the Christian journey. **Our hope is not the absence of our regret or misery or doubt or lament but the presence of Jesus (x2).**

It is hard to know why God allows depression, sadness, deep despondency, grief and loss.

As God comes close to Elijah—we know that he does not leave us in these times—he comes himself to gently wake us, and prepare us for the journey.

As God comes close to Elijah—we know that we are not alone, and the worst thing we can do in times of depression, sadness, deep despondency, grief and loss is to isolate, to remove ourselves from community.

Does Elijah's suicidal moment shock you? Elijah was not an unusual or strange person—the Apostle James says, "Elijah was a man with a nature like our own."

Elijah—wanting God to take his life, Elijah in despondency, Elijah in grief, Elijah in depression—Elijah was a man with a nature like our own.

But what do we make of chronic depression, or situational depression, of heart-break.

What do we make of all the times we have been zealous for God, poured out all we had without regret and it seems to have come to nothing?

What do we make of the never-ending internal battle with our own sense of desertion by God, isolation from others?

What do we do with our disorienting sense of emptiness and aloneness?

Malcolm Guite inked the drawing you see on the screen. He wrote this about his work, "In this image I used only black Indian ink, masking fluid and water. I wanted to give the impression of bleak leafless trees disappearing into a freezing mist. This stripping back of denuding winter time reveals a beauty and form that has always been there but has gone unnoticed. Think of a cobweb that is invisible until the scintillating frost of winter steals through the landscape as we sleep and turns the morning into a Narnian dream of white.

This denuding also happens to us when, forced by circumstances, we too are stripped back, perhaps by grief or by struggling with an addiction, humiliation, or anger and depression. What seems like death in the landscape of our lives can, if we wait patiently, teach us to integrate our shadow side and help us to know ourselves. If we can come to prayer like this, letting what we truly are be exposed, because to Him all hearts are exposed, then maturity begins, as we say to Him, 'Lord take me as I am. I can come to you no other way.'

As we survey the story of Elijah from our moment in history—we see a panorama he never could.

Elijah burst on the scene in 1 Kings 17. He strode into the courts of evil king Ahab and laid down the gauntlet. Then for 3 ½ years he wandered around the wilderness waiting for rains being withheld to take their effect. At the end of 3 ½ years he went head-to-head with the forces of evil in the prophets of ba'al. Fire came down from heaven and consumed a sacrifice and nothing changed—life went on as normal and evil continued to triumph.

A greater than Elijah—Jesus Christ burst on the scene in Palestine, he was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to confront Satan, and there he laid down the gauntlet. For 3 ½ years Jesus wandered around the wilderness that is this world and finally went head-to-head with the forces of evil, with the evil one himself. And a different sort of sacrifice was consumed—Jesus Christ. In a single act whose magnitude and power was as great as the God whose life was taken -sin, death and hell were defeated.

Elijah in his despair and despondency, depression and grief could not know this final outcome. As he saw the triumph of evil, tasted the bitterness of defeat and experienced the deep sadness of what seemed his useless mission he could not know that his journey to that mountain prefigured the coming of the Great prophet to another mountain.

He could not see the day when all the satanic forces that enlivened and gave power to the evil of his world would finally be defeated.

You who are weary and despairing, you who have journeyed long in a fight against the evil within and a fight against the evil without—take heart—you cannot imagine the joy that is in store.

Elijah's role in the battle with evil was not confined to his own moment in history. About 870 years later, Elijah would appear on another mountain. This time he would not be laying under a broom tree asking God to take his life, he would not have the angel of the Lord who is God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sustaining his soul, feeding his body and encouraging his heart. No—instead he would be on a mountain speaking to that angel of the Lord who had once loved him so fully, who had once touched him in his suicidal moment, who had said arise and eat. Elijah would meet Jesus of Nazareth in his hour of need, Jesus was about to turn in his earthly journey

and begin heading towards the cross. Elijah was sent by God to sustain the heart of Jesus, to offer encouragement to that One who was about to confront all the forces of evil in one final battle, the battle that would decisively end the war.

Elijah could never have imagined this destiny!

You will journey through times of depression, through sadness, through grief, through loss, through sorrow so great it may burst your heart. But you are not alone.

The Lord says to you in this moment—arise and eat! He provides here in this table the bread and the wine to sustain you on your journey.

The journey is too great for you—come to the table of the Lord.