

END OF THE LINE

SHERARD EDINGTON

1 Kings 19:1-16

It is no secret in this church that we've got a lot of sickness and injury among us. There are a lot of folks who are either in the hospital, recovering from surgery, or have an illness that they have been struggling with for a long time. These include lung disease and heart disease; we've had spinal fusions and knee replacements; and we're dealing with cancer and other ailments and maladies. My prayers go out to all of these folks. And if you yourself are not sick, then someone near you is. Just about every household in our church right now is experiencing this.

Being sick is challenging. For one thing, it's exhausting—physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually. A prolonged illness can make one question their faith in God. We also spend a lot of time trying to figure out why. Why me? Why did this happen to me? What was the cause of it? We want answers.

We see this today in the story of Elijah. Now, Elijah himself was not physically ill, but he was certainly overcome with a debilitating sense of despair. After all, the government was chasing him down—seeking to end his life—and he felt utterly alone.

Elijah was a prophet. He lived in Israel in the 8th century BC. At the time, the King of Israel was Ahab, and Ahab was married to Jezebel. Jezebel was not Jewish; she was from Phoenician princess who worshipped the god Baal. She brought the worship of Baal into Israel, and her husband did not stop it. Although he was king of the Jewish people, he supported her worship of Baal and even built a temple to Baal in the capital city. As we read in the Book of Kings, *There was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel.*

Under Ahab, the worship of Yahweh in Israel was at risk of being damaged, if not lost. Because of the sins of this king, God sent a drought onto the land—a three-year drought. Near the end of the third year of this drought, Elijah challenges the priests of Baal in Israel to that great contest on Mount Carmel to see who could entice their god to bring fire down on the altar.

We all know this great story: how the priests of Baal built their altar out of wood and danced around it all day, cheering and offering up prayers to their god. Meanwhile, Elijah was sitting over his lawn chair mocking the priests for not being able to accomplish anything.

When the priests of Baal were finished (unsuccessfully), Elijah constructed his altar. He built it with stone, and he dug a moat around it, pouring water onto the stone until the moat was filled. This altar was not about to catch fire. Elijah called upon his God, and of course, fire came down instantly.

Having won this contest, for some reason, Elijah then called upon his people to murder all the priests of the god Baal. When word gets back to Queen Jezebel of what Elijah has done to her priests, she sends him a warning—actually, it's a threat. She says, *What you did to them, I will do to you*. In other words, she intends to have him assassinated. She has the power to do that, and Elijah is understandably frightened. He flees for his life. He travels hundreds of miles south through Israel, down through Judah, all the way to the southern border of Judah, to Beersheba. He goes as far as he can, staying within the lands of his people, and when he can go no further, he collapses under a tree. He prays to God that he might die. He can do no more. His prayer goes like this: *It is enough now, O Yahweh; take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors*. His ancestors, of course, are all dead, and he feels that he is as much use as they are at this point.

Elijah is despondent. He's depressed; he's burned out. He's done all he can for God, and yet now he's got a bounty on his head, and he's running for his life. He feels abandoned by the God that he has served, and he wants to die. There's no more point in living. He's drained; he's got no more strength to fight. He's got nothing left to give. And so Elijah, whose name literally means *Yahweh is my God*, goes to sleep, hoping maybe just not to wake up.

And that is how we feel when we are overcome with sickness. When we've been fighting an illness or a malady for a long time, we just can't fight anymore. We feel like we are at the end of the line. But while Elijah sleeps, an angel appears, shakes his shoulder, wakes him up, and says, *Get up and eat*. And there in front of Elijah, the angel has provided a loaf of bread and a jug of water. So, he eats and drinks, but he goes back to sleep. Later, the angel returns, but this time he says to Elijah, *Get up and eat; otherwise, the journey will be too much for you*. And Elijah obeys. He eats and drinks, and he is refreshed. He's able to go on the strength of this food for 40 days through the wilderness until he comes to Horeb. Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai, and that's the place where Moses received the Commandments from God. There at Horeb, Elijah takes shelter in a cave.

What Elijah is doing here is making the reverse journey of the Hebrews from Egypt through the wilderness into the Promised Land. He's leaving the Promised Land and heading back into the wilderness until he comes to Mount Sinai. He spends a night in that cave, and the next day God speaks and asks this question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

Elijah responds with a litany of how he had been faithful to God and how the Israelites had abandoned God, and now how he is alone. Elijah just wants us to feel

sorry for him. He's complaining to God. What he says is, *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.* Can you hear his anger here? Anger at the life that he has dedicated to God seems about to end, and that God is not there. No one is there. He's alone. His life has no meaning, no purpose. And yet it does, because we see a lot more in this story than Elijah can at this point. There are three things that I would like to lift up to you this morning from this story as it will progress further—three lessons from this piece of scripture.

The first lesson is that when we find ourselves in a situation like this, whether we are fleeing from the government or fighting an illness, we need to **learn to lament**. That's the first lesson: learn to lament. Lament is a fancy word for complain. Our Bible has a book called Lamentations—an entire book dedicated to the lament of the people. We also have psalms of lament. Of the 150 psalms in our Bible, about 50 of them can be classified as a psalm of lament. A lament is a cry to God from someone who is in distress. It is a complaint. A lament can come from an individual who's suffering an illness or depression or grief, or it can come from an entire people or nation who are imperiled by an invading army, a plague, or a natural disaster. The psalms of lament that we have all follow a pattern. Each begins with a cry to God—a plea that God will hear them. One of the psalms puts it this way: *Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress; incline your ear to me.* They cry out to God.

The second part is a description of their suffering. The most poignant of these is found in Psalm 102, which is the lament of a person who is extremely ill and on the verge of death. This person tells it like this: *My bones burn like a furnace; my heart is stricken and withered like the grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread; because of my loud groaning, my bones cling to my skin.* Here is someone so sick that they can't even eat. They're malnourished; they are just skin and bones.

But it doesn't end there, because every psalm of lament ends with praise and thanksgiving—praise and thanksgiving that God hears their cries of complaint.

So laments are more than just complaints; they are complaints that call God into a partnership with the complainer. A lament attempts to do something. When we lament, we must be honest with God, sharing with God our feelings, but we are also to hand our lives over to God. "God, this is my lament; this is my situation. I give thanks that you hear me, and I give myself to you. We are going to work through this together." You may not get what you want; you may not be healed, but God is there with you.

Many years ago, I had a parishioner who was, I'll say, a complainer. Every Sunday morning, I'd come into church, walk down the aisle, and say hi to folks, and she'd always grab my hand and just start complaining—complaining always about

her health. "Oh, preacher, my elbow hurts, and my knees just don't bend." To be honest, she was in pretty good shape, and she also had a good life. She had family around her all the time; her grandchildren were there in church with her every Sunday. I mean, yeah, she could complain, but in perspective, there were others a lot worse off than her who weren't complaining. Every Sunday, she'd grab my hand and just begin this litany of complaint, and it went on literally for years until one Sunday, I don't know why, I just stopped her. I said, "Polly"—we'll call her Polly—"tell you what: tell me something good that happened to you this week." I wanted to see if we could break this cycle of complaining. And she got really mad at me. She looked at me with a face full of anger because I had asked her to tell me something good in her life. I thought about it a long time; I never figured out what was going on. I guess to her, I was God's representative, and I was the one she was bringing her complaints to, and she didn't want to be denied that opportunity. The problem with her complaining is that it didn't lead anywhere. It didn't go anywhere; it was just whining. She wasn't asking for healing; she wasn't confessing sins; she wasn't engaging God in any way. She didn't want to be changed; she was deep in the depths of her complaints and didn't even realize it.

In our story about Elijah, Elijah complains, but he also laments. When God first asks Elijah, *Why are you hiding in this cave? What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah does come back with that complaint: *I have been very zealous for the Lord. I have given my life to you, and look what's happened. I'm now on the run.* He gives that litany to God, but then, as we see, he also gives himself to God. So the first lesson from this story is to learn to lament. It's okay to complain as long as you bring God into your life.

The second lesson we find here is to **develop positive options**. And really, this one's the most difficult to do because when you're sick, when you're down, you feel like you're out of options, you're at the end of the line. All your available options are lousy; they involve pain, discomfort, continuing this treatment that's hurting you—maybe even death. Not good. It's difficult to imagine a positive option in that situation, but it can be done. It means stepping out of the cycle of despair and taking control.

As I said, this one is the most difficult because each of our situations is different. We all have different needs and different wants. But here are a few ideas to get started. One positive option might be to allow people to do things for you. We're all independent here; we all like to rely on ourselves and do things ourselves. But maybe now, in your illness, it's a good time to rely on the kindness of others.

Another option could be to see a therapist—find somebody you can talk to who can help guide you through this. Let them be a disinterested third party.

Another option would be to connect with your loved ones and focus on your relationships. Renew your relationships; don't make it about you and your pain, but make it about the relationship you have with those in your life.

Another option is to do something special for yourself. Take a trip if you're able; go somewhere you've always wanted to go. It may be Paris; it might be Watertown—you decide.

Elijah, when he was at the end of his line wanting to die there under that tree, found a positive option. He ate—that was it. He ate and drank and rested. Yes, he had run out into the wilderness and laid down to die, but this positive option availed itself upon him. The angel appeared and told him to eat. He did and then slept. The angel woke him up again and told him, *Eat; you need the strength for the journey that is ahead of you.* We see that Elijah was not at the end of the line; he had more to do. The second lesson here is to develop positive options.

The third is to **discern God's purpose for your life** because no matter where you are in your life, God is not done with you. You still have tasks ahead of you; you just need to figure out what they are. What is it that God is calling you to do? Elijah discovered this after traveling alone for 40 days through the wilderness. He comes to the mountain of the Lord, climbs into a cave, and there God asks him that question: *What are you doing here? What's your purpose? What's going on in your life?* Elijah answers with this complaint: *I've been zealous for the Lord." But look where it's brought me; I'm now on the run.*

Elijah is instructed to go outside the cave because the Lord is about to pass by. Before Elijah even gets out of the cave, he hears *the great wind—a wind so powerful it splits mountains and smashes rocks—but the Lord was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; the same with the great fire. The Lord was not in the fire. After all this ruckus and chaos, then we are left with the sound of sheer silence.* I don't even know what that sounds like—a sound of emptiness, the sound of a vacuum. It's then that Elijah steps out of the safety of the cave, opens his eyes to the world, and faces God. God asks that same question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah responds with the same answer as before—word for word—but this time it's different because Elijah has now seen the face of God; Elijah himself has changed. He has come into God's presence; he's discovered that God is not what he thought. If you want to find God, you're going to look in the loud and noisy places—the fire, the earthquake, and the wind—among the powerful. But God wasn't there; God is in the quiet place between the chaos. When God asks Elijah that second time, *Elijah, why are you here?* Elijah answers, *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; the Israelites have forsaken your covenant; they've thrown down your altars; they've killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.* But this time is different. Elijah doesn't answer in fear and anxiety; he's not driven by self-pity and despair. No, he's

been in the presence of the Lord, and he is changed. He has seen the direction his life is to take. He became a partner with God.

God presents Elijah with a new calling: a new purpose. He instructs Elijah with two tasks. One: go appoint new kings over the lands of Aram and Israel—change the political landscape. And two: he shall appoint the prophet Elisha as his successor. Now, Elisha doesn't take over immediately; he continues as God's prophet for some time. But now Elijah knows that he is not alone. His work will continue through his successor. He has a purpose: go and anoint new kings and find a successor for yourself. Do not give up, but know that when the time comes, your ministry and work will continue.

And we, in our times of distress and despair, when we feel like we've come to the end of the line, that is when we need to look to God and ask, "What is God's purpose for me? What are the tasks that God has set for me?" Because no matter where we are in our lives, God still has something for you to do. It may not be as great as anointing kings, but God has a purpose for you.

The third lesson here is that we need to listen and discern God's purpose for us to find out our role, so that the end of the line is never the end of the line—that we always have a calling and a purpose with our God. Amen.