



Sunday, July 19, 2020
Sermon Series: Didn't See It Coming

How to Know When You're Burning Out
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

1 Kings 19:1-10 (NRSV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'" ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

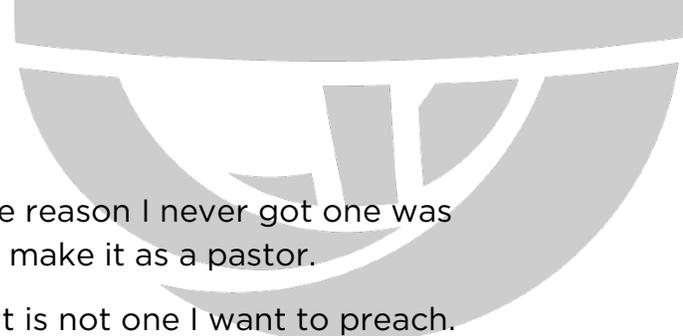
Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

This is a new look for me.

[For those of you reading this as a manuscript, I actually look like a pastor today.] After almost 22 years of ordained ministry, I have my first real clergy collar. (The hand-me-down men's tab-collar shirt in the back of my closet that I wore when I was portraying a pastor in a skit once doesn't count.)

Since I've always worked in congregations with colleagues who don't regularly wear clerical collars, this garment hasn't really been part of my pastoral identity. And companies that make styles and fabrics with women's bodies in mind haven't





been around that long. But truthfully, part of the reason I never got one was because I was never quite sure if I was going to make it as a pastor.

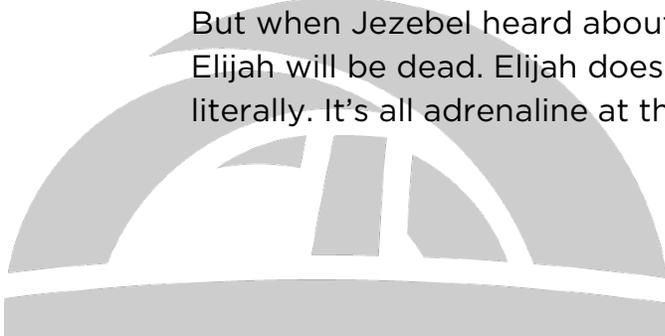
Believe me when I say that a sermon on burnout is not one I want to preach. Because it means admitting that's why I left full-time parish ministry 5-1/2 years ago. It felt like I was spinning and spinning instead of actually getting things done. I was carrying around a lot of guilt about families and teenagers who pretty much disappeared after confirmation day. As an introvert, Sunday mornings had always taken a lot out of me, but I found myself hiding in my office because I didn't have the energy to talk to people. I dreaded when it was my turn to preach, because I had nothing to say. I no longer believed I was actually doing God (or the church) any favors.

What I probably needed was a sabbatical. What I did was take the first opportunity to try something completely different. And while now I can laugh and say, 'It seemed like a good idea at the time,' for a few years I was spiraling into some pretty bleak places.

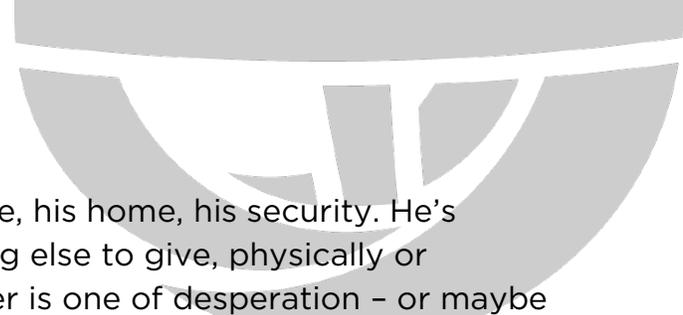
So does any of this sound familiar to you?

We're living in a time of unbelievable stress and uncertainty. It's compounded by rising levels of depression and anxiety. All of these things might play a factor in contributing to burnout. But burnout is like stress on steroids. It's exhausting, but it's more than just being tired. It's isolating, but it's more than just being lonely. We might use the word casually in conversation - but there is nothing casual about it. If you've ever really looked at an actual burned-up match, you get it. It's charred and dead. Used up. Useless. It may have served its purpose well but now it's not good for anything. Or, as Pastor Carey Nieuwhof writes, it doesn't matter how much water you pour in your bucket if your bucket is full of holes.

I don't know which image speaks to you more - a burned-up match, or a bucket full of holes - but I want you to hold on to it as we consider this story from 1 Kings. Because when we encounter Elijah he certainly seems to be someone who's completely burned out.



See, Elijah had a hard job. He was called by God to proclaim the woe he saw in the land - starting with the king, Ahab, and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Elijah probably experienced the greatest triumph of his career when he embarrassed the prophets of Jezebel's favorite god, Baal, during an epic showdown on Mt. Carmel. But when Jezebel heard about it, she swore her revenge: By the next sunset, Elijah will be dead. Elijah doesn't wait to see if she means it. He takes off running - literally. It's all adrenaline at that point. Israel is far behind him when he finally



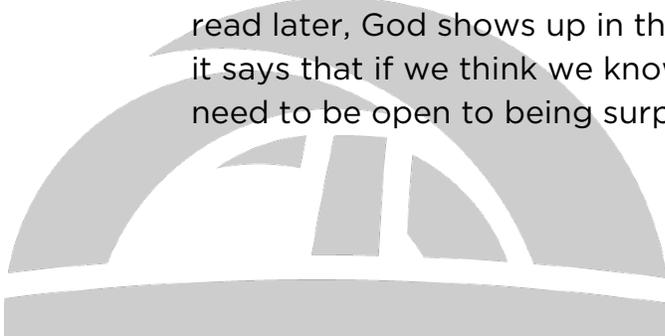
stops to catch his breath – and so are his people, his home, his security. He’s overwhelmed. Utterly exhausted. He has nothing else to give, physically or emotionally. When he finally collapses his prayer is one of desperation – or maybe resignation. He’s completely spent, and can’t see a way out. That sounds a lot like burnout, doesn’t it.?

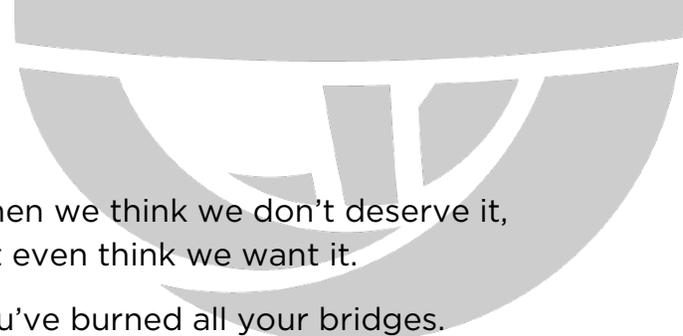
Still, there are some things we can learn from Elijah, though. He may have withdrawn from the world, but he hasn’t withdrawn from God. He starts by praying. Sure, his words aren’t very encouraging, but they’re still there. And notice that what God offers Elijah first are practical, tangible provisions – bread, water, rest. Times which are mentally and emotionally taxing take a physical toll as well. Drinking enough water and getting enough sleep might seem like small things, but trust me, they’re huge. And better yet, they’re things we can actually pay attention to and do something about. I can’t always control my feelings. But I can make sure I spend at least 30 minutes a day walking outside. And I can (and do) take Tylenol PM every night. You probably know how stress shows up in your body – in your heart, or your head, or your gut. So what’s one thing you can do today to help relieve it? Do it. Religiously.

That sounds like a pun, but it’s actually a key way to cope with burnout too – lean on your faith, even if it feels like it’s barely flickering. After Elijah turns his future over to God, and takes care of himself, he goes actively looking for God’s presence and guidance. He leaves the broom tree in the desert and sets off for Mount Horeb – the mountain where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments. He knows it’s a holy place; he will find God there. Our own burnout can feel like time in the spiritual wilderness, too. God’s voice can be awfully small; our own inner critic distressingly loud. So write down Jesus’s promises and put them where you can see them: *Come to me and I will give you rest. I came that you might have abundant life. I am with you always.*

Here’s the amazing thing: given Elijah’s attitude, you’d expect God to get frustrated or angry with him. Isn’t that what we do, sometimes, when we see someone wallowing or stuck in a cycle of self-destruction. Come on, we say, it’s not that bad. Buck up. You’re better than this.

But even though God challenges Elijah’s perspective, God never rebukes him for showing weakness. Elijah’s never told to get over it, or cheer up, or calm down. God listens, takes him seriously, and shows up. God shows up. In this story, we read later, God shows up in the sound of sheer silence. That in itself is remarkable; it says that if we think we know where to look for help, for God’s presence, we need to be open to being surprised. But more than that, it’s a reminder that no





matter what, God will be there with us, even when we think we don't deserve it, even when we don't feel it, even when we don't even think we want it.

When you're burned out, it's easy to believe you've burned all your bridges. Asking for help is hard. Asking for help when you don't believe you deserve to be helped is harder. And asking for help when you don't believe you deserve it, and don't think it will make a difference anyway, is just about impossible.

A woman I know recently shared that it took her a lot longer than it should have to take that first step. But she finally realized she wasn't going to be able to will her way out of the dark place she was in. She said, "For the first time, when the doctor asked, 'How are you,' I didn't say, 'Fine' or 'Eh, ok.' I said, 'Horrible.'" And then I shared why. I'd already been dealing with a lot of stress in my life, and then this year has been one juggling act after another, and it hasn't gone well. Outward I'm trying to laugh my mistakes and failings off on 'pandemic brain.' But inside it feels like I'm dying on the vine. And it scares me."

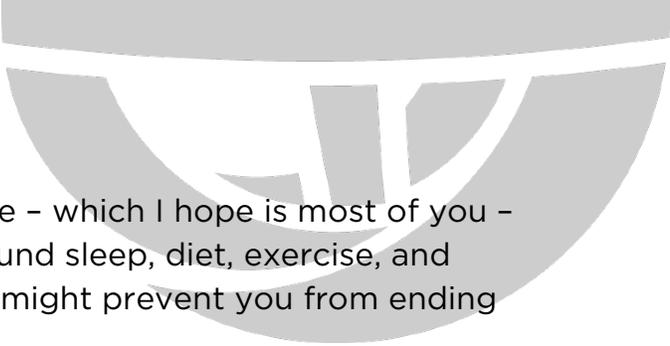
Dear friends, if you're teetering on the edge of burnout, hear this: please please please don't try to go it alone. Whether it's a friend or a pastor or a therapist or a doctor, there are people who would do anything, anything, to help you. They can't take the darkness away, but they can sit with you in it.

And if you're worried about someone you know who seems to be going under, just be there for them. Call, text, stop by for a visit - anything to let them know they're not alone.

The thing is, getting out of burnout doesn't necessarily mean returning to the way things were before. Sometimes it means trying something completely new. Or making some pretty significant changes in your lifestyle, or career, or relationships. At the end of Elijah's encounter with God he doesn't miraculously reignite his passion and purpose. He's still stuck in a cycle of regret and self-pity. So the irony of this story is that God's appearance doesn't end Elijah's burnout. God gives him a new assignment, yes - he's told to go and anoint a new series of leaders for God's people. But one of those leaders is to be a new prophet, Elisha. Is this good news for Elijah, or not? We don't know. But we do know that even in the midst of his burnout, God is still with him.

If you're worried that you might be heading toward burnout - or you're pretty sure you're already feeling crispy - start by admitting it out loud. Ask God to guide you to the right person who can help. And then take a deep breath and share where your heart is these days.





And if you aren't dealing with burnout in your life - which I hope is most of you - it's still a good idea to establish good habits around sleep, diet, exercise, and supportive relationships now. Because they just might prevent you from ending up someplace you don't want to go.

Because I know you are people who care, I want to assure you that I'm doing better. It's been a journey. But I'm trusting more that God knows what God is doing in my life, even when I don't. Who knows, you might see me wearing this collar more frequently.

But more importantly, I pray you trust that wherever you are, Jesus is with you there. God's response to Elijah is for you too: I will light your fire and be your light. Amen.



