

“Get Up and Eat”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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1 Kings 19:4-8
John 6:35, 41-51

What would you give anything to go to sleep to? I know some of you have confessed to me that you have had trouble sleeping in these anxious times. You want to sleep-- to find relief from things like Delta variants, and a polarized country, or maybe something more personal, like regret, or loss. From apps that promote sleep, natural sleep aids like Melatonin, or more serious stuff like Lunesta, to trendy mattresses you can unbox, with brand names like “Avocado,” “Green Thyme” or “Nectar”; the business of sleep is serious business. Still, many minds keep working in the wee hours of the night, thinking over, and over, and over, as if an idea at 3 in the morning can churn up a solution that will just fix it all.

As for Elijah, he was at an even more despairing point in his journey. He declared to God, ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ And then he goes to sleep, under the broom tree.

To understand some of Elijah’s despair, let me give you a little background. Elijah was prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, during the reign of King Ahab. These were not great days to be a prophet. King Ahab had strayed from the ways of Davidic kingship; his wife, the Queen-- Jezebel-- had come to Israel as a Phoenician princess, and she had brought with her the ways of her gods and goddesses. Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible explains, “Jezebel’s name, in fact, means ‘where is your Prince?’ In the liturgy of the Baal cult, miming the cry that goes out when vegetation dries up in the land: ‘Where is Baal the conqueror? Where is the Prince, the Lord of the earth?’ The ques’tion anticipates the return of fertility, the release of Baal from the power of Mot, god of death.” In condemnation of her name, it is spelled with the Hebrew word *zebel* in it, which means poop. Her name was a slur in the mouth of the Hebrews.

Elijah’s name had meaning, too. His name means, “*Yahweh is my God.*” But while Elijah was wandering around trying to remind Israel, especially the King, who their God really was, Jezebel had been a compelling evangelist. These were days of drought and famine for Israel, so summoning gods like Baal who represented powers of fertility, and the goddess Asherah, who was seen as creator, certainly had their appeal. Archaeologist William Dever notes that artifacts found in northern Sinai dating from the 8th century BCE include feminine figurines alongside inscriptions to the Hebrew God-- El, or Yahweh, and some are inscribed “Yahweh and his Asherah”. Dever suggests that there existed in ancient Israel a folk religion, and a book religion;² what ended up written in book form was the patriarchal understanding of God; but

¹ Phyllis Trible, “Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, January 1, 1995.

² William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*.

what the people practiced and believed included an understanding of a goddess alongside the understanding of God.

In 1 Kings, we see these ideas being battled out. Jezebel has at her command 450 prophets to Baal, and 400 prophets to Asherah. At the same time, Jezebel is ordering that the prophets of Yahweh be killed. 100 prophets of God are sent into hiding, in caves. But finally, Elijah throws down the gauntlet to King Ahab, telling him he must decide which he shall worship. Elijah issues a challenge: allow all the prophets of Baal-- 450 of them-- to put a bull before the altar. The prophets of Baal may call on their gods to set a fire beneath the bull. Elijah would do the same, he alone, and call on God to light the fire. The prophets of Baal go first, and despite their prayers, chanting, crying, and even shedding their own blood, they cannot call forth fire. When it is Elijah's turn, he soaks the wood with water, for dramatic effect, and sure enough, God sends a fire upon the bull that makes a very nice barbeque. For Elijah's victory lap, he has all the prophets of Baal and Asherah seized, and killed.

You would think that Elijah would be delighted with his victory-- it was, after all, a victory for God. The drought in the land even ended. But Elijah is despondent. He takes refuge beneath a broom tree, and he hopes to die. Was he fearing Jezebel's revenge? Or had he realized, in his murderous rampage-- that he wasn't all that different from Jezebel? Had he become the person he had come to hate? Where our scriptures find him, under that tree, *he* is the one feeling like poop.

Interestingly, trees were often associated with the goddess Asherah; several places in the Bible mention shrines to her under green trees. And the prophets Jeremiah and Hosea both allude to a festival in which the Hebrews eat cakes to honor the Queen of Heaven, Asherah. While Elijah sleeps beneath the tree, he gets a visit. An angel touches him, and says, "Get up and eat." The angel has made a cake on hot stones, and has provided a jar of water. So Elijah eats. He drinks. And he goes back to sleep. Again the angel touches him, telling him, "Get up and eat; otherwise, the journey will be too much for you." So Elijah wakes and goes on, 40 days and 40 nights, through the wilderness, and the cakes the angel gave him beneath the broom tree gave him strength for that entire journey.

"O taste, taste and see, that the Lord is good," Psalm 34 tells us, which we read in our Call to Worship today. But where our scripture found Elijah today, sitting under a broom tree, his taste was about as dull as someone who had lost their sense of taste and smell due to COVID. We might say that Elijah was languishing. A few months back, the New York Times ran an article titled, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing." The author tells us, Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021." The author does suggest some remedies to help anyone trying to wake up from the fog of languishing.

Name it. Elijah does this, by naming his feelings before God. I suggest that telling God is good, but if you want God to help you do something about feelings of languishing, or even

despair, it's best to tell someone else; I truly believe God can work through the gifts of people in our lives, but we need to first open those connections.

Find flow. The article on languishing describes “flow” as “that elusive state of [absorption](#) in a meaningful challenge or a momentary bond, where your sense of time, place and self melts away.” When you find flow, you discover you don't have to be stuck anymore. For Elijah, perhaps that was his wilderness journey to Mount Horeb, which he takes right after he gets up from under the broom tree. I know for some people, finding flow is as easy as taking a yoga class, tending a garden, or enjoying a vacation. For others, finding flow may require something more earth-shattering, like moving to a new country, or starting a new career.

Bring Provisions. For Elijah, he needed sleep, which he found. And the angel recognized he needed food, too. It can be hard, when languishing, to know how to tend to your bodily needs; but these are spiritual needs, too. I know one person who was languishing, and her problems felt so big they would often overwhelm her. I suggested that she take things one step at a time. “Start with eating something today,” I told her, “and text me a picture of what you eat.” This person now has a regular practice of cooking mouth-watering food, and sharing it on social media; not only has she found life in the mindfulness of daily food; her pictures inspire others to find joy and comfort in the simple wonder of food.

What provisions do you need for life's journey? If you aren't gathering them *now*, when *will* you? Are there boundaries you can set, so you know when to sleep, and when to wake? Is there someone in your life who can remind you, as the angel did, to “Get up and eat?” Or can you offer that for someone else? Are there angels-- which just means, messengers from God-- trying to remind you what to do, to tend to your body and your time?

Another thing I will add as an antidote to languishing is to ask this question: **What does God keep waking you up to?** Scripture does not spell out this answer for Elijah. We only see him going to sleep, lamenting that he is no better than any of his ancestors. We aren't sure what Elijah means by that. Like any of us, Elijah probably had good ancestors, and bad ancestors, and ancestors-- like David-- who had both good and bad about them. And as much as Elijah *thought* he was doing right by God through slaughtering hundreds of prophets of another god, his violent actions make him no better than Jezebel who worshipped them. I wonder, given the symbols of the goddess Asherah that are embedded in the text, whether Elijah may have woken up to the feminine nature of God. Or to the possibility that his zeal for doing what is right clouded his calling to do what is good. There are surely ways I think and act which I believe to be promoting good in the world; however, it is very possible that generations from now will judge me for things I did not even recognize as bad or wrong, just as I judge my ancestors who once enslaved other human beings; I suspect our misuse of the earth's resources will be one way future generations will judge us.

We are not sure what might be going on or changing Elijah when the angel awakens him, twice, but I humbly hope and pray that God can wake me up to how I have strayed from God's goodness, in this lifetime, so that I can make changes and future generations can look back on

me with grace. This is one of the important reasons our worship includes the practice of confession.

Jesus also mentions ancestors-- he notes, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." This is the thing that makes us human-- that frailty of life, and knowing it will end. The irony is that Elijah does not die; instead, he is sent up in a whirlwind into heaven. On the other hand, Jesus really does die-- he who tells us that *he is* the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats of this bread will live forever. With Jesus's body as our bread, we know that it has enfleshed real fear; real suffering; real grief-- but also, this bread embodies real hope, real love, real salvation. This is bread that *rises*.

Get up, and eat.