

“Radiate!”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 34:1-8

1 Kings 19:4-8

How many of you have been watching the Paris Summer Olympics? These games and athletes and their stories just radiate with excitement, hope, and joy. What are your favorite events? ...

Maybe sometimes you are like me, and indulge in fantasies of glory. If you could have the athletic abilities to succeed in any Olympic sport, whether today, or have the memory of achieving gold in some sport of an Olympic year past, what sport would that be? Let's assume you also would have the body and fitness to excel at that sport. I was once an amazing imaginary Olympic gymnast. But then I grew really tall, and became much better at imaginary Olympic soccer. Turn to a neighbor and share with them what sport *your* fantasy Olympic fantasy achievement would be.

We get inspired, don't we, from hearing the stories of Olympic athletes and what obstacles they overcame to get to their achievements. Noah Lyles pushed through COVID to race the 200 meter sprint, collapsing at the end and leaving the stadium in a wheelchair. We especially love seeing that while countries can be fierce competitors, they can also uphold visions of peace and a shared humanity. How cool was it when Simone Biles and Jordan Chiles, who had received the silver and bronze medals in gymnastics, bowed down in tribute to the Brazilian gymnast Rebeca Andrade stepped up to the podium to receive the gold? When I was watching beach volleyball, things got really heated in the third match between Brazil and Canada. Players were exchanging words and, even though they were grasping each others' hands while doing it, you could tell they were really angry about something. The DJ caught on, too, and so started playing the song "Imagine." The audience caught on and threw their arms over their neighbors' shoulders, swaying and singing with the music. As the tune drifted onto the court, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace," the players

themselves started laughing and clapping. The game went on— with Brazil taking the win.

It would be nice, wouldn't it, if the Christian faith always felt like that level of glory! Instead of gold, silver, or bronze medals, laurels of blessing would wrap around your neck. Instead of fans going wild with cheering and holding up signs with your name on it and flapping flags of your country, you could hear God's *actual* voice saying, "You got this! Way to go! I believe in you! You are my beloved! With you I am well pleased!" What if the simple practice of our faith could result in countries bowing to one another in respect, or working out their differences over laughter, clapping, and song? What if our faith could help us to continue with strength, even when we are feeling sick?

I'm not saying that faith cannot lead to these kinds of experiences. I imagine some of you would say that faith has, at some point in your lives, resulted in an experience such as one of these.

But the truth is, most days of being a Christian don't feel like a parade is being thrown in your honor— even in this country, where Christians still unofficially receive more privileged status than members of other religions. The Psalmist tells us to "Look to God, and be radiant!" but to be honest, sometimes it can be hard to crack a smile— much less, be radiant.

But our memories of the bible are like how we take in social media. We remember the radiant captions of glory. Just as we notice our friend's enviable vacations and brags about their children from social media, the crossing of the Red Sea, the miracle of the loaves and fishes stand out in our mind from the bible. We also may remember the bits that are audacious; the scandalous thing a politician posted on X about immigrants stands out like genocidal demands of Herod. We remember what people wore to the Met Gala, like we remember Joseph's coat of many colors, or the prophet wearing sackcloth and ashes.

But ask anyone who takes on the task of reading the entire bible, even the forgotten books, and they are more likely to tell you that there is a lot of day to day, ordinary stuff in there. There are also stories of failure and heartbreak, sickness, and depression. Today's reading finds the prophet Elijah in a place like that. Elijah is sitting under a broom tree, asking God to take his life. He is in

exile. He is being sought by his enemy, Jezebel. He is probably questioning whether he is the right person to lead- even though he had just been successful against 450 prophets of a Canaanite god, Baal, he was overzealous in his faith, and went on to kill those 450 prophets. It was too much.

Part of what makes the Olympics so compelling is that we also know the stories of struggle for athletes. We love hearing about their human side. How Suni Lee grappled with a kidney infection that she thought would remove her from her big love of gymnastics- but still made a shimmering performance at the games. I heard about Cindy Ngamba, part of the refugee team. She is in exile from Cameroon and cannot return there because she is gay, and the current government considers that a crime. Her boxing team has given her another identity and sense of belonging. At the Olympics, she won a bronze medal, the first for the refugee team. And at the end of the month, we will witness the Paralympics, and see how they inhabit their *disabled* bodies with beauty, skill, speed, and strength.

While our stories may not be as epic, that should not stop us from trying to shine with our faith and with our lives. We have our own little ways that we can radiate. I am okay with not being as fast as Sha'Carri Richardson or as powerful as Simone Biles. But I do plan to go to the gym this week, so I will take that as a win.

I do not have the devotion of Elijah, or the passionate faith of Mary Magdalene. But I can find moments this week when I will put aside my business, turn off my screens, still my body, and have an honest conversation with God. Not everything we do as Christians has to be heroic. There is beauty and grace in the ordinary moments of faith, and even in the failures.

Being a Christian is that it is not always about achieving. It is also about being. We are not the only ones who reach for God. God reaches for us. When Elijah felt so discouraged that he wanted to just sit under the broom tree, and die, an angel touched him, and said, "Get up and eat." Elijah saw, set before him, a cake on hot stones, and a jug of water. He drank. He ate. And he slept. A second time the angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." And so Elijah did- and then he went on, and for 40 days and 40 nights he continued in strength, until he got to Mount Horeb- the place where Moses

had received the covenant with God— and at that place, he was to meet God. Elijah waited for God, and a great wind came— so great it was splitting the mountains. But God was not in the wind. And then an earthquake came. But God was not in the earthquake. And then a fire lit up the mountain. But God was not in the fire. Finally, the sound of sheer silence surrounded Elijah. And it was in the silence that God spoke to Elijah, and offered direction for what he shall do next. Like the Democratic party telling Joe Biden that he needed to step back and let Kamala Harris move ahead, God showed Elijah that it was time to pass the mantle to a younger prophet, Elisha.

Our communion meal reminds us that Jesus brings to us a sacred meal that allows us to be in God's presence and care. A meal that sustains us, when otherwise the journey is just too much. A meal that prepares us for what God might tell us to do next. "Taste, taste and see that the Lord is good."

This meal, it reorients us past our failures, back into that place of imagining glory— but not glory for ourselves, but glory for the world God hopes to share with us. And so we imagine peace, even when there is no peace, and we do what we can to be makers of peace. We imagine the hungry fed, and even though we alone cannot change the cost of living in Bergen County, we can help hand out food to hungry neighbors, or speak out in favor of adding affordable housing in our towns. We imagine how much God loves and values each human with sacred worth, and so we treasure our church members who have been exiled from their home country. We hold a mirror to the young person who has come out, to show that they reflect the image of God. We look into the eyes of someone who is much older than us, and we honor the light that shines in them, and their stories of years gone past. We look at our own lives, and consider how our light might shine, not to reveal our own glory, but to add more light to the world.

DEDICATION

The bounty of summer is upon us. God's table is filled with a feast beyond our wildest dreams. We are grateful to be God's welcome guest. May the gifts we give during this offering bless others as we have been blessed. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Look to God and be radiant.

In small ways and large, let your light shine.

May God provide all you need, fed from Christ's table, strength for the journey.

May the Spirit send you with blessing, peace, and the feel of God's face smiling on you.