

“Seeking Sanctuary”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson this afternoon comes from 1 Kings 19:3-8. Here we encounter the prophet Elijah who has just successfully completed God's command to convert believers of the pagan god Baal and kill its prophets who had been sacrificing infants in Israel. When Queen Jezebel, a radical Baal worshiper who had been murdering prophets of the Lord, heard the news, she vowed to Elijah that she would seek his life and kill him within a day. Here begins our text. Then Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But 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." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He 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. The 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." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Here ends the reading. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I once asked a Wednesday Worship regular what this Wed. Afternoon worship service meant to him, what it was to him in his life. His response was "Sanctuary, in many different ways, this service is Sanctuary for me." His answer has lingered in my mind since then, and comes to the forefront of my thoughts each week as I am in prayer over this service and for all of you. I like this notion a lot as it is one that has its roots in the divine example and command of the Sabbath, an entire sermon series in and of itself to be sure. Sanctuary. An important space, a place to fortify oneself, to seek refuge and strength. Biblically it is a space of worship, a space that is found both in the form of a temple or garden where God is glorified. Popularly it is not only a literal space, but a space in our hearts and lives, a space for nothing other than you and God. When we say we are seeking sanctuary we seek not only a literal space in which we might find God, but seek to cultivate within ourselves a spirit of openness and quietude where the Word of God might be revealed to us. We seek to be filled up by such a space even as we empty ourselves out fully within it.

Over the course of the past couple of weeks we have been talking about faith at work. And this passage challenges us to think about faith at work through the faithful at rest, seeking sanctuary. I think we all would agree that sanctuary is not only a pretty precious commodity these days, but that it stands on the brink of downright extinction. For all the marvels of technology perhaps its greatest and most subversive deficit is that as it has streamlined the efficiency and availability of our work it has also somehow altered the behavior of its creators. It is in fact smarter than we think because it has managed to reprogram us into feeling that we must somehow live our life in a way that accommodates all the ways in which work and communication is capable of permeating every moment of every day. But it is not only technology that is the culprit for our inability to find rest these days, it is an invisible, unspoken standard of behavior in our free market society that says that if you are not in motion then you are somehow failing to live up to your 'potential' that you are 'wasting time' - wasting the opportunity to take advantage of all these great opportunities, to write more emails, close more deals, run more errands, schedule as many "recreational" activities as possible, get more done, take smarter steps toward your

future, prepare better for eternal life even, do, do, do, go, go, go and everything is at stake- everything depends on this movement, on this efficiency. This makes sanctuary in any form pretty hard to come by, and not just because there are so few spaces that ask that you turn off your cell phone when you enter but because we now feel we need great heaps of permission to seek that space for ourselves and feel justified in doing so. I am sure each one of you know any number of people that believe taking a half an hour on a Wed. For worship is a waste of time. Is it any wonder when the demands are so unrelenting, when the pressure to fill every moment with what our world defines as productivity is so close, and when we ourselves would sometimes love to just flee to the wilderness, curl up under a tree, and wither away because we simply cannot bear the weight of the demands closing in any longer. Ask most anyone, regardless of their vocation, regardless of their employment status, and regardless of their depth of spirituality and they will all likely be able to testify to this feeling. Ask Elijah:

Where as one would think that a prophet who had just successfully carried out the decree of God would be rejoicing, Elijah like the prophets of God who came before him, finds himself fearing for his life. His work has been difficult and unrelenting, has called him beyond what he is comfortable and the command has been from God himself, talk about expectations! And now Elijah finds the momentum of his labor closing in on him, an assassin seeking his life at the bidding of an enraged pagan queen, Elijah flees not only from Jezreel to Judah, a 90 mile journey, but then travels a day further into the wilderness and collapses in dejection and desperation. He is despised by many, and is exhausted by the tasks that he has carried out, he has pushed himself to the limits even unnecessarily- for once he crossed into Beersheba he was out of the political reach of Jezebel, and yet he pressed on an additional day into the wilderness for fear of what was closing in behind. "It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life." Elijah is indeed in the wilderness. Weary of his work, consumed by anxiety, pursued by that which seeks to stake a hold on his life, one would think he was working in corporate America. But God does not grant this request of his faithful servant, God rather provides the sustenance his weary body and soul require. Not once, but twice the angel of the Lord appears to Elijah and offers him food. It is not an offer, really, but a requirement of the Lord: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." God has much more in store for Elijah, weather or not he is willing, and insists Elijah accept the nourishment offered by the Lord. In essence, God is enforcing a sort of sanctuary seeking for Elijah when the last thing he wanted to do was take time for rest- in fact, he would have preferred to die because to rest meant that whatever he felt pursuing him would draw ever closer, and yet without rest too his fate was certain.

For Elijah, seeking sanctuary meant giving pause for physical and spiritual renewal that was enforced by God- wouldn't that be nice. The small meal that was provided him sustained him for 40 days and nights and he was enabled to continue in the work of the Lord. Accept the gift of rest that God has given and the fruit is multiplied. One author thinks of seeking sanctuary in terms of "spiritual gravity", an idea that rest allows all things in life and in our hearts and minds to settle, to find their place. Overwork is like stirring muddy water to try and make it clear when what is needed is time for the sediment that clouds it to become still.¹ In our world where so

¹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath*, New York, Bantam, 1999, p. 26.

many things close in on our time, our families, on our own selves, allowing ourselves time and space for renewal seems to be a concept that has faded into obscurity though the effects of life without it are very real. But the command to Elijah to rest is intended not to bring about death in the law, but celebration in life as a gift from God who desires fullness and wholeness for his people. Seeking sanctuary is the effort to take time out for contemplation and celebration of God each day, in an inward our outer place where we may reconnect with the substance of our life and life in Christ amidst all the noise around us and delight in the communion, fellowship, and provision of our God. Seeking sanctuary, be it in a :30 worship service on Wednesdays, taking the scenic route home with the radio and the cell phone off, walking outside to a meeting, devoting 10 minutes in the morning to prayer, reading a psalm before bed, anything that connects you with a sense of God's presence each day will be as cakes and water in the wilderness with untold benefits to the believer.

St. Anselm of Canterbury wrote a petition instructing himself to give pause and restore, with restoration not being an end in and of itself, but for Anselm the only means by which God might be sought and strength renewed. He says "Come now, turn aside for a while from your daily employment, escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside your weighty cares, let your burdensome distractions wait, free yourself awhile for God and rest awhile in him. Enter the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything except God and that which can help you in seeking him, and when you have shut the door, seek him. Now, my whole heart, say to God, "I seek your face, Lord, it is your face I seek."² Our hymn today reflected the words of Psalm 23, "In pastures fresh he makes me feed beside the living streams- The sure provision of our God attends me all my days. Oh make thy house be my abode, and all my works be praise." The nourishment of God that is found in respite, in the delight of his presence is bread of life- bread for life. A jar of water from God is filled not just with a day's provision, but with streams of living waters for the soul. Seek sanctuary in God's presence and you will be renewed that your work will give glory to God. Free yourself awhile for God and rest in him.

What is chasing you into the wilderness, closing in upon your heart and your mind with a relentless nature beyond what you feel you can bear? What threatens your passion for your call? Your zeal for life? God's desire for Elijah was not that he wither beneath the broom tree. God's desire for Elijah was rest. That he would feed himself on the sustenance of the Lord that he might be nourished for what lay ahead, "Get up and eat, Elijah, or the journey will be too much for you." Restore yourself or you will not be able to go on. Seek sanctuary and reconnect with God as your refuge and your strength or your body and your spirit will become as parched as the wilderness, Elijah, and there is still much to do. I invite you this day to celebrate the gift of sanctuary in this place to be sure, and to seek sanctuary for yourself each day as a gift of our Lord that is far more precious than the commands of this world. That you might experience rest for the weary from one who never slumbers. Quench your thirst from the well that never runs dry. Make space for the revelations of God to you that may be found only in silence and seek after the Lord's command, 'be still and know that I am God.'

²Ellen T. Charry, *Inquiring After God*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 5.