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First Presbyterian Church
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1 Kings 19:4-8

“It Is Enough”

I love watching the Olympics. From the opening ceremony to the closing ceremony, you can find me just about every night watching the primetime coverage. And if I can, I don't mind sneaking in some of the lesser watched sports, too, like skateboarding, surfing, and even table tennis.

Like millions of other Americans, I watched gymnastics, both the men's and women's competitions, and was smitten by Stephen Nedoroscik (NE-dor-ah-zik), the pommel horse guy, aka Clark Kent. What a routine! And of course, among the excellent women's team that just dominated the competition, there is Simone Biles. With 11 Olympic medals and 30 World Championship medals, she's called the GOAT because she's earned it.

But perhaps you remember back to the Tokyo Olympics, when Biles was diagnosed with a case of what's known in the sport of gymnastics, as “the twisties” which means that, somewhere in mid-air, you lose all sense of direction and your body can't find itself in relation to the ground. With two feet planted on earth this sounds disturbing enough, but for a gymnast who regularly reaches the height of over 12 feet, usually upside-down and usually going very, very fast – this is terrifying. And so Simone Biles stepped back, withdrawing from competition so she could get well.

This week's story from 1 Kings that you heard Carrie read picks up the story of another GOAT with a case of “the twisties.” And his name is Elijah.

In terms of the claim to the title GOAT, here's a rundown of Elijah's life and ministry:

He called fire down from heaven;

He raised from the dead a widow's only son;

And we are told he did not die but ascended into heaven (that fact alone sort of seals the deal for me that he was a GOAT.)

The New Testament confirms the Hebrew Scripture's estimation by placing an appearance of Elijah alongside Moses with Jesus at the Transfiguration. And the greatest compliment paid to John the Baptist was that he was like Elijah.

But when we meet Elijah today, thoughts of death, a loss of interest in his vocation, deep fatigue, and feelings of hopelessness plague him and so he cries out from utter depths of despair, "It is enough now, O Lord. Take away my life." Sitting alone under the broom tree, utterly depressed, and burnt out, he has lost his will to live.

In the lead up to this moment, though, Elijah was the GOAT – he was at the top of his career as a prophet and had seen much success. If you go back just one chapter in 1 Kings, you'll read about his great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. At his command, hundreds were massacred thus winning a resounding victory for God over the false god Baal, and his bold action against apostasy can still be heard in the New Testament Apocrypha, where he's portrayed as a model of piety and righteous zeal for the Lord.

But even before that, he had known success by bringing the widow of Zarephath's son back to life. Elijah's ministry has been incredibly blessed. He's the most famous prophet in Israel. It was as though all the power of God was getting channeled right through this one man. If Elijah were a minister today, he'd have a growing and thriving congregation. People would flock to his worship services on Sundays. The church budget would be healthy and flush with money. They'd start a building program to add on to the

church building to make room for all the people attending worship and Sunday school and the youth programs.

Elijah was for all intents and purposes on top of the world when 1 Kings 19 begins. And yet . . . King Ahab and Queen Jezebel could not let the massacre of their loyalists go unanswered; the political threat Elijah posed was too great to them. But he also posed a religious threat, for when he beat the prophets of Baal, and therefore Baal himself, he made the king and queen look like fools. As a result, Elijah was deemed a criminal and enemy of the state and had to flee for his life, out of Ahab's and Jezebel's territory, where he tries to escape Jezebel's death threats against him by going to south to Beersheba, and then even further south into the wilderness, which is where we meet him today.

The GOAT has fallen apart and has a severe case of the twisties. All that swagger has turned into stagger. Unable to escape the heat of the sun or the despair of his heart, and feeling isolated, depressed, and disillusioned, he asks God to take his life. And how does God respond? By sending an angel to give him cake and something to drink. Cake and something to drink. The angel didn't answer Elijah's prayer to die, nor did the angel throw Jezebel off Elijah's trail. She was still in hot pursuit. Nor did the angel magically and instantaneously make Elijah's life better or transport him to an earthly paradise where his worries would vanish. Rather, the angel gave Elijah just enough sustenance so he could carry on.

But not before he cried out. Not before he admitted "God, I can't do it anymore. I can't go on." Not before he was finally forced to admit that he can't do it, that he isn't completely self-reliant, and that he could use some help.

Going back to Simone Biles, when she dropped out of the 2020 Olympics because of the twisties, she faced *a lot* of criticism. “How could she?” people wanted to know, or more accurately, “How dare she?” “Everywhere I went I felt like they could see ‘loser’ or ‘quitter’ across my head,” Biles reflects in the Netflix series that chronicles her. “I always felt like everyone was staring at me, even if they weren’t.” But this shouldn’t come as a surprise to any of us. In a sport, like a culture, that valorizes those who soldier on (who among us remembers Kerri Strug’s second vault at the 1996 Olympics) Simone Biles shocked people by stepping back and withdrawing from competition.

Friends, this may come as a shock, but soldiering on isn’t necessarily the faithful thing to do. We need to give ourselves permission to be honest with ourselves and with God that we can’t do it all, that we aren’t completely self-reliant, and that we could use some help.

Elijah demonstrated strength when he cried out to the Lord; he showed strength when he allowed himself to be cared for; and he showed strength when he refused to live a life of quiet desperation. Showing such strength is the faithful thing to do when we are in the wilderness.

Because in the Bible . . . and let’s be honest, in real life too, the wilderness is a formidable place. With so little water available, food and hydration are sketchy; the weather is unforgiving, and the possibility of losing oneself is ever present. Even one’s identity is different in the wilderness. In his movement from unimaginable success to profound sorrow, Elijah had to re-assess his life and his ministry. At first, he opted for fear and despair. But in his depths, he remembered that God had been with him in success and he trusted that God would be with him now, in the wilderness. And though his prayer grows out of depression and hopelessness, it is prayer that is vital and honest.

I have shared with you before that when I have found myself in the wilderness, I knew I needed to let go and let God, as it were, because when you're deep in the wilderness, there's not much else you can do. I had to let go of old habits like self-determination and self-reliance and the "I can do anything if I work hard enough" attitude . . . habits that had worked well for me in life, and cultivate new habits, because those old ones don't work in the wilderness.

And so I learned the skill of handing over the reigns of control to God, and I relied on the support of other people, all of whom had also spent time in the wilderness. And I learned that God may not give me what I want or what I need, but God does give me enough to take the next step.

Friends, all of us at some point find ourselves in the wilderness. Maybe yours was or is the wilderness of grief; perhaps you've wandered here for months or years without finding the way out, and it's just becoming more than you can bear. Maybe it's the wilderness of illness or addiction, and you've been trudging along feeling helpless and drained as you watch your vitality – or that of someone you love – slip away. Maybe it's the wilderness of stress – stress that comes from deadline after deadline; or from bills piling up; or from a marriage falling apart. Or the wilderness of despair, which — with the hostility that plagues our common life and the unending stream of news-worthy crises — is an all-too-familiar landscape for many of us. Whichever wilderness you have wandered in – or are currently wandering in – most of us reach a point where the journey is too much. And – like Elijah – when we come to a solitary broom tree in the wilderness, we sit down and cry out to God in despair: "Enough, God! It's too much!" We all get to a point – sometimes many times along the way – where we cry out to God because the way is too much, because we are crumbling under the weight of our burdens, and we just can't make it on our own.

Someone once wrote that, “The hardest thing for any of us to believe is that the wilderness has anything to do with God. It rather feels like God has vanished.” But in Elijah’s story, and so many other stories like it, God hears our cries and gives us cake – twice served – food for the journey, and it is enough. The cake God offers you may come in the form of family or friends, or a really good therapist, or much needed time away. Sometimes it looks like prayer at the bedside, or help with rent, or casseroles. And sometimes it shows up in ways we didn’t ask for or even think we needed, but it turns out to be just enough to keep us going.

So friends trust that when the spiritual twisties show up in your life, you can always rest and recover in the presence of God. Grace is always there when you need it. Step back. Breathe. Listen for the gentle whisper. Anchor yourself in who God is and what God does. And when you get to that place where you need to confess, in fact when you are brave enough to confess: “I’m done!” God is ready to meet you in that moment. “I’m here,” God says and makes sure you have bread for the journey. Bread that is enough, so that the journey will not be too much.

Amen.

Faithful and Ever-present God, just as You sustained Elijah in his moment of despair, we ask that You also sustain us. When we feel overwhelmed and weary, remind us that You are our strength and our refuge. Nourish our souls with Your word, as You fed Elijah in the wilderness. May we rise with renewed hope, ready to continue the journey You have set before us. In Your mercy, lift us up and carry us forward, trusting in Your unfailing love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Sources:

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