

## ***Hungry Souls***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 7, 2023 – The Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

Text: I Kings 19:4-12

I don't know about you but it seems to me that there are a whole lot of really annoying commercials on television these days. Some of them are silly and funny, like the ongoing ad battle between Liberty Mutual and Progressive for the craziest car insurance commercials. Some of them are so fanciful as to be ridiculous, like the car commercials that show average people like you and me driving through the countryside and randomly deciding to take some side road all the way to a top of a mountain before realizing there is no where left to drive. Really? If you spent that much money on a brand new SUV are you really going to go extreme off-roading on the way home from the dealership? I doubt it. Then of course there are the ubiquitous commercials for pharmaceuticals. Some of these, in my opinion, tread right up to the line of false advertising as the scenes you are watching of happy, obviously healthy people supposedly suffering from dreaded conditions or illnesses are overlaid with voiceovers detailing all the absolutely horrendous possible side-effects the drug in question could cause. Holy cow! If you haven't noticed this, next time one of those commercials comes on, close your eyes and just listen to the voice-over. It's terrifying!

Peter and I did encounter one clever commercial in the last few days which is a knock-off of both the pharmaceutical commercials and the Total-T commercials hawking supplements for aging men. This one has a succession of different people just standing in various situations lamenting their "low E." We wait for the inevitable diet supplement to be pitched but then have to do a doubletake when we realize what is really being promoted is membership in the Planet

Fitness gyms in the area. The first time I saw the commercial, I was confused. The next time I knew what was coming so I could focus on the commercial and began to appreciate how clever it was. Now when I see it, I find myself smiling at this commercial which is actually offering pretty good health advice. If you are struggling with a low energy level, in most cases you do not need yet another pill to pop into your mouth. The best thing for you probably is to get out and get moving more. Even 15 minutes of simple walking done every day can improve your sense of physical well-being. No pharmaceuticals required. Cut out just a little bit of sugar, fat and carbohydrate from what you eat each day and you'll feel even better. Simple things, simple changes, can make a huge difference in the quality of our lives each day.

I am sure I am not telling you anything you don't already know with my words this morning, words about eating healthy and getting some exercise. We've been hearing these admonitions all our lives. Sometimes we listen. Often times we don't. Why? Because life is just too crazy, too busy, too frenetic to focus much energy on even these kinds of small changes to comfortable, daily routines. For example, you know what you eat is vitally important. How many times have we told our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, that food is the fuel for our bodies and that good fuel is just as important for our bodies as it is for the cars and trucks that whiz by us every day. We do that, right? But, will we invest the extra 10 minutes required to make ourselves a salad or yogurt parfait for lunch? Most times the answer to that is no. Why? Because there is something else to do that feels more urgent. Similarly, we know we need to get more exercise in an intentional way. Some of us are limited in how we can do this, true, but many of us are not. Yet, the lure of a good book or a favorite television program is often too strong to overcome. And let's not even

talk about needing to get enough rest and sleep. Many of us struggle with this dilemma. Schedules are so jam packed that too often the easiest place to carve out the extra time so desperately needed for this, that or the other thing comes out of what should be quiet time in our lives, rest time, sleep time. And even here our “friends” in big pharma offer us solutions in pill form. Not the best option, we all know.

Simply put, dear ones, in our society in the good old USA these days we are stressed to the max in more ways than we can count. We are overtired and anxious most of the time. We try to improve our movement ratios by investing in gym memberships and fitness equipment to no avail. We eat what we like and what’s convenient too much of the time. The gym memberships go unused after a few weeks and the exercise equipment gathers dust. In short, we are a mess and we feel stuck there. Enter our good friend Elijah from this morning’s story in the Old Testament.

Elijah was one of the great prophets from the time of the kings in Israel. I’ve always pictured him as kind of cranky and not the happiest of people in good times, never mind with the kind of tasks God was always handing off to him to accomplish. Today’s story describes Elijah after one of these encounters with the local monarchs that did not go well. Elijah had just defeated the high priests of Queen Jezebel (you’ve heard of her, right?) in a contest designed to prove whose God was greater. Elijah won and killed the Queen’s priests in the process. She was, as one would expect, furious and was determined to do to Elijah what he had done to her prophets. So, Elijah ran away from her. And, as you might be able to pick up on in this text, he was really angry at God for putting him in this situation. Plus, he was feeling very sorry for himself. After all, he had done exactly as God had wanted and achieved what God wanted him to do – and now he was in even worse trouble with the King than he had been.

This is the point at which we encounter Elijah. He is sitting under a broom tree at the side of the road, exhausted, hungry and feeling really sorry for himself. “It is enough!” he complains to God. Then he lays down under the broom tree and falls asleep. An angel awakens him and urges him to eat and drink. He does and then falls back to sleep. Again the angel awakens him, urging him to eat and drink, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you” the angel explains. So again Elijah does as directed and gets up to go to Mount Horeb, the holy mountain of God. He found a cave and fell asleep there overnight. In the morning, God starts talking to him. He’s a prophet after all, and prophets are used to these kinds of experiences with God.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks. Elijah, used to conversations with God, immediately starts complaining about all he has accomplished only to be on the run for his life from a furious queen. God listens patiently and then, in response, instructs Elijah to go out of the cave and stand on the side of the mountain” for the Lord is about to pass by.” He does and soon all heck breaks loose. First a great wind came up, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a great fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. Then came a sound of sheer silence. And that’s when Elijah knew beyond doubt he was in the presence of God.

We know this story, Elijah finding God in the sound of sheer silence. Of course, God was not in the silence either. God was the silence. God was demonstrating to Elijah in the silence that all of nature was God’s. If I was Elijah, I would have been terrified by this point because as much as he and God were on speaking terms, I don’t think Elijah ever imagined encountering God so directly, especially after complaining so much. But, amazingly, Elijah was not terrified.

He recognized in this entire encounter with God, going all the way back to the angel feeding him and caring for him in his state of complete exhaustion on the roadside, that he was never really alone. God had always been with him. In his exhaustion, in his anger, in his frustration over doing the right thing and still ending up feeling defeated, he had lost sight of God for a moment. He had lost sight of God's plans for him in the moment and God had done what God needed to do to first care for him, and then remind him of who he was. Then, God sent him right back into the fray. And Elijah went.

Dear friends, how much we are like Elijah these days. As I speak with so many folks throughout the week, I know how exhausted so many are, how overwhelming life feels too much of the time. I know hearts are breaking. I know dreams for a life imagined are slipping away. I know there are so very many things to be anxious about and escaping the endless list of worries feels impossible. Dear ones, in these moments of our lives, which happen all too frequently these days, we are Elijah. We have worked hard all our lives trying to do the right thing. We have given up on some things in order to pick up the others that needed doing in the moment. We are tired. We are aching in body, mind and soul. We are hungry for what we don't know. We are all Elijah in these moments.

So, how did Elijah recover? How did Elijah move forward when he could see no future, no hope, no reason to keep going? He didn't. Not right away. Instead, he allowed himself to be cared for, no questions asked. He accepted the help of God's angel with food and water and rest. He recovered. He ate and drank and rested more. He recovered more. He moved forward, sustained and strengthened, able to encounter God fully once more. In other words, Elijah stopped trying to control things and gave himself over to being in the moment. He stopped being angry and frustrated by what he did that wasn't

recognized or appreciated and he surrendered to his current reality. He literally rested in God's presence until he was able to go on.

Dear ones, I am here to tell you the same thing will work for us, God's beloved people. But, simple as this sounds, it is so very difficult to do. It is so very difficult to give ourselves over to our feelings in the moment, to acknowledge we are angry and disappointed and frustrated. We have not been raised in our culture to give in to such powerful but negative emotions but, dear ones, those emotions are very real, very powerful and very debilitating unless we find a way to acknowledge their presence and recover from them. This takes courage and strength. It also takes patience and mercy, with yourself and for yourself. This is the real work of our lives each day, and we seldom if ever stop to acknowledge it. We seldom stop to do as Elijah did and rest in God's presence.

In closing this morning, I would like to share some wisdom from Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the best known Zen teachers of our lifetimes. He devoted his life to helping others make meaning out of suffering regardless of the faith tradition they practice. His wisdom is breathtaking in its simplicity and its ability to feed hungry souls, guiding them toward healing. He has written literally thousands of short papers and books but this morning, I'd like to end with just one thought of his. He writes:

“You can be the sunshine for another person. You can't offer happiness until you have it for yourself. ... Learn how to practice mindfulness in such a way that you can create moments of happiness and joy for your own nourishment. Then you have something to offer the other person.”<sup>1</sup>

Dear ones, as followers of the Living and Resurrected Christ, we too devote ourselves to being sunshine for other people. It's what we do as we live and practice the Good News of the Gospels. May our friend Elijah remind us that, important as that practice is, even we need rest

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *How to Love*, ©2015 Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, Inc., p. 17.

and renewal, and we need to make time for it in our too busy, anxious lives. What that might be, might look like, will be different for each us but remains vitally important. We must remember that God not only wants us to take care of ourselves, God expects it. Actually, God requires it. Otherwise the journey ahead will be too much for us. Amen.