

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 16, 2021

A Sermon Written for Mental Health Sunday

“O LORD, take away my life”

Based on I Kings 19:1-9

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin



Edward Munch, “The Scream,” 1895, lithograph print.

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I Kings 19:1-9 (NRSV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴ 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.” ⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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. ⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Rev. Robert Leslie Holmes shares the legend that “God sent one of his angels to Satan with the message that all the methods the devil uses to defeat Christians would be taken from him. The devil pleaded to be allowed to keep only one. The angel, thinking it an unusual, modest request from the greedy devil, agreed Satan could keep that one. “Which one would you want to keep?” the angel inquired. ‘Let me keep discouragement,’ was Lucifer’s reply. The angel agreed. Satan could keep discouragement. And the devil rejoiced for, said he, ‘In this one I have secured all I shall ever need to accomplish my dastardly work.’ (www.sermons.com)

In our scripture lesson today we find the prophet Elijah massively discouraged. Actually, discouraged is an understatement. He was so depressed that he wanted to die, perhaps even contemplating suicide. What made this man, remembered as one of the greatest heroes of the Judeo-Christian tradition who was the only person alongside Moses to appear to Jesus during the Transfiguration, no longer want to live? After all, had he not just single handedly (well, with God’s help) brought down some 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Baal’s consort Asherah?

A little refresher for those who may not know or remember this story, which you can find in I Kings. Elijah, from Tishbe in Gilead, was a prophet when King Ahab reigned over the northern kingdom of Israel from 874-853 BCE. Political alliances were then built through marriage. So King Ahab reached out and married the Phoenician woman

Jezebel, who was the daughter of the priest-king of Sidon and Tyre. Like many marriages today where husband and wife may come from different faith traditions, King Ahab worshipped Yahweh but Jezebel brought with her into the marriage the worship of Baal. Jezebel was not about to adopt the religion of her husband but persuaded him to introduce the worship of Baal-Melkart, a nature god, also killing as many prophets of the Lord as she could. Her husband, King Ahab, even built an altar for Baal (I Kings 16:32). Elijah, outraged by this, went to King Ahab and asked that all of Israel assemble at Mount Carmel for a contest that would show whether the God of the Israelites or the Canaanite God Baal was the true God. Elijah stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal and all 400 prophets of Baal's consort Asherah. The God of the Israelites prevailed in a resounding victory. For Elijah it was not enough just to show the people who the one true God was. In a gruesome display of violent force, he had all 450 prophets of Baal and all 400 prophets of Asherah slaughtered (I Kings 19:40).

Queen Jezebel planned to retaliate by killing Elijah. Elijah took this threat against his life seriously. Today's story begins with Elijah on the run as a fugitive, fleeing into the wilderness around Beersheba. The word 'wilderness' here is key. We should not just think of a literal geographical wilderness in the barren desert, even though this was indeed the case. 'Wilderness' also connotes an internal barrenness where one may feel forsaken by one's community and perhaps even one's God. The scriptures say Elijah was afraid. Even so, he asked his servant to stay behind, wanting to be alone. We know that often people who are depressed do not want people around them. Into the wilderness Elijah went and ***"sat down under a solitary broom tree"*** (I Kings 19:4). We picture an exhausted, hungry, thirsty man in a state of internal turmoil and anguish. Miserable, alone, completely spent, anxious, depressed, terrified, without hope. And then, alone with his back against the broom tree, he goes one step further. He declares that he actually wants to die, saying ***"It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."*** (I Kings 19:4).

Wanting to die. Perhaps even to commit suicide. This, of course, is not the first mention of one of the great heroes in scripture wanting to die. Jonah, even after he had succeeded in bringing the Ninevites back to God, said ***"And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live"*** (Jonah 4:3). Moses became so discouraged by the complaining of the people he was leading through the wilderness that he cried out to God: ***"I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery"*** (Numbers 11:14-15).

Note that Elijah, Jonah, and Moses all had been successful in reaching out to God's people. Yet their discouragement, despair, and depression were so great that they wanted to die.

In story after story in the Bible we encounter men, women, children, rich, poor, young, old, Jew, Gentile who struggle with mental health challenges. Think about the prophet Jeremiah whose emotions were so strong that he was known as the "weeping prophet." Read through the book of Lamentations, whose pages are filled with the author's heart-felt lament about his anguished internal conditions when he said: "***See, O LORD, how distressed I am; my stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me, ... my groans are many ... My eyes are spent with weeping ... he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. [M]y soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is ...***"

And there was the all-too-human King David whose collection of songs paint a vivid picture of the many dark nights of the soul he faced. In Psalm 6 we find a powerful depiction of a deep anguish and depression: "***I am languishing ... my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror ... I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears.***"

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. This Sunday is "Mental Health Sunday" in our denomination during which we are called to remember all the many people in our society who are plagued by depression, anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, personality disorders, substance abuse, eating problems such as anorexia or bulimia, autism spectrum conditions, childhood aggression, acquired brain injuries, dementia, Alzheimers, delirium, and so much more.

Last year I shared with you some pre-pandemic statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health which stated that, on any given Sunday, 20% of our adults and 20% of our teenagers may be experiencing some form of mental health disorder and/or mental illness ranging from anxiety, depression, mood disorders, PTSD, and any number of other mental health challenges. Unfortunately, the numbers have grown significantly during this Covid-19 pandemic. Numerous articles in newspapers, journals, websites and on television have documented the toll on mental health brought about through the social isolation of the pandemic, job loss, at home schooling, work from home, not to mention all those who got sick from Covid and those who died. A recent article said that:

“The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people’s mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. During the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from one in ten adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019 ... many adults are reporting specific negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%), and worsening chronic conditions (12%), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus.”

www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/

Of course, we know that the pandemic has also had an extremely negative effect on the mental health of our children and youth as so many were forced to move to online learning at a time in their lives where socialization is so very important.

It is important to stress that mental health issues are not the result of personal shortcomings, a poor upbringing, or a lack of faith. Did you know that Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Michelangelo, Isaac Newton, Beethoven, Leo Tolstoy, Henri Nouwen, and one of my favorite artists Vincent van Gogh all struggled with difficult mental health challenges? Mental health issues might be likened to equal opportunity employers that can affect anyone at any time of any background since they have a biological basis related to the brain’s chemistry. Also mental health disorders are not a spiritual condition that can be prayed away. Mental illness, like cancer, heart disease, or diabetes, is a biochemical reality that may need to be treated with medication.

Unfortunately, there are tremendous stigmas associated with mental health that make people reluctant to talk about it or to seek help. Rev. Sarah Griffith Lund, author of the book *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence About Mental Illness, Family & Church* writes that: *“Because the stigma attached to mental illness remains so powerful, there is little public recognition of the need to show compassion to people with mental illness, let alone for their caregivers and the family members”* (p. 92). Did you know that *“according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (publication #ADM 86-1407) the two worst things that can happen to a person are leprosy and mental illness. In American society, ex-prisoners stand higher on the ladder of acceptance than people with mental illness”* (cited Griffith Lund, p. 95).

People suffering from mental illness are marginalized, feared, and distrusted. A case in point would be that when there is a mass shooting, the reporting and discussion soon turns away from gun ownership to mental illness even though most people with mental illness are not violent and are not more or less likely to own a gun than others.

It is important for people to share their personal testimonies around mental health issues to break the stigma, so here I go. I know that on the two occasions in my own life when I experienced debilitating depression (when I was 16 and later at 25) and could not see any light at the end of the tunnel, I was reluctant to share my inner torment and despair even with my own family. I soldiered on without help, professional or otherwise, and fortunately saw my way through the darkness with God's help. Those were the days when the crucifix was such an important symbol to me (more so than the empty cross we have displayed in Protestant churches) as I knew that Jesus understood and even shared in my suffering. While I hope never to have to experience this darkness again, it has helped me tremendously in my ministry (more than any kind of book learning) since, when I am with people who are despairing and struggling with mental health challenges, I do not minimize how they are feeling. I seek to hold out hope for them as I lift them up in God's love and light, while encouraging them to seek professional help. Clergy, by the way, should always be humble and know when to refer to others.

I wish I knew then what I know now. That anxiety and depression are widespread. That recovery is likely for most people, even with serious mental health illnesses, through a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments, the hope that faith in God brings, and the support of family, friends, and a loving and well-informed faith community. And, importantly, that there should be no shame in having mental health disorders.

Let's return to our scripture for today. We left Elijah, a hunted man, sitting alone in the wilderness under a solitary broom tree, pleading with God that he might die. While it might not make sense that Elijah would feel this way since he had just achieved a major victory against the prophets of Baal, perhaps we might understand his extremely anguished state by thinking of the many members of our military who have been successful soldiers but have returned home from places like Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), perhaps having flashbacks of the violent situations they were in. Was Elijah perhaps having flashbacks that brought back images of the gruesome slaughter of all those priests of Baal and Asherah?

Isolated, all alone, at the end of his emotional rope, not feeling that he had the strength to live, and not hearing a response from God, Elijah ***“lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep”*** (I Kings 19:5). But God did not leave Elijah alone! Our scripture says that ***“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.*** (I Kings 19:5-6). An angel touched Elijah. An angel spoke to Elijah. An angel gave Elijah hot food to eat and refreshing water to drink. An angel encouraged Elijah and allowed him to get some more rest, while providing protection and reassurance by remaining nearby.

Well, you know what the Bible says about angels and how God acts in the world? We all can be angels in disguise! God acts through us, calling us to function as the actual body of Christ on earth as we minister to all those around us. We might imagine ourselves as the angel who came to the suicidal Elijah in his state of extreme mental distress and helped him regain his will to live through human touch, kindness, encouragement, understanding, and the very practical help of giving food and drink as, through our loving presence, we held him in a sacred space so that he could heal and regain his sense of purpose in life.

The church is called to be like that angel who ministered to Elijah as we take mental health seriously, reaching out and opening our hearts and doors wide open to people who have mental health challenges. Indeed, when people do seek help, they more often look to clergy, church elders, and supportive congregations than to mental health professionals. This means that churches have an important God-given role to play and many are taking the initiative in this area. I was excited, for example, to learn that the African Methodist Episcopal Church (a denomination with 2 million members) is in the midst of a three-year partnership with the Alzheimer’s Association to educate its members (*Christian Century*, December 4, 2019, p. 14). We should be very proud of our own denomination—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—who have a “Mental Health and Wellness Initiative” through the National Benevolent Association (<https://www.nbaca.org/mental-health>).

What can we at First Christian Church in Murray, KY do? At the beginning of 2020, I asked our church to join with other churches in our denomination by **“becoming a people of welcome and support to people with mental illness and/or mental health disorders”** (State-of the Assembly GA-1523 adopted by our denomination in our 2015 General Assembly). Before the pandemic closed the doors of our church to in-person gatherings we had two Wednesday Night Live gatherings that focused on our new initiative.

First, members of the local branch of the “National Alliance of Mental Illness [NAMI]”) spoke about common mental health issues and the services they offer. Second, the Mayfield psychologist Dr. Karl Dick gave a highly informative presentation to us on “Living with Dementia.” Since sharing personal stories about living with mental illness is essential to helping to overcome stigmas, we next benefited greatly from having Dr. Janice Morgan, retired MSU French professor, lead us in a number of discussions (including during the pandemic on Zoom) about her recently published memoir, *Suspended Sentence*, in which she shares her experiences of parenting a son struggling with bi-polar disorder, substance abuse, and legal issues.

We must take seriously that people who are suffering from mental health issues are fearful of the stigma that can be associated with it and that they might be defined by their diagnosis. They may be worried about being discriminated against at school, in the workplace, social, or other settings. We should do everything we can to fight such stigmas through our welcoming and supportive presence. And we should be advocates for social justice in making sure that people with mental health issues are not discriminated against and receive good services. I challenge each and every one of you to become more knowledgeable both about mental health issues and the resources that are available in our community (including the “National Alliance of Mental Illness [NAMI]”) not only for people who themselves are suffering from mental illness but also for their family members, friends, and caregivers. I also encourage you to take the nationally accredited “Mental Health First Aid” training so that, just as we need to be prepared to respond to a physical health emergency, we also know how to respond to a mental health emergency. A number of us have already gone through the training, including our two faith community nurses Judy Lyle and Ann Thornton, our former children’s director Nancy Dycus, our Director of Communications Debbie Batteiger, and I.

Should you not have the time to take the training, we also have purchased a number of books related to mental health issues for our church library. I have a number of DVDs, which I look forward to showing on the big screen in our sanctuary when we can gather together for a longer period of time. And so that we might respond to people like Elijah in our scripture today, who no longer wanted to live, I would like our congregation to work through the kit entitled *The Lifesaving Church: Faith Communities and Suicide Prevention* that has been published by our denomination.

Was the angel successful in ministering to the suicidal Elijah? Yes, indeed! Today’s scripture ends by saying that after the angel reached out to Elijah, encouraging him, giving him food and drink, and allowing him to go back to sleep:

“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.”⁸ 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.” (I Kings 19:7-8)

We, as church, are called to be like that angel who appeared to Elijah as we educate ourselves about the biological basis of mental illness, as we work to decrease stigmas, and as we encourage people to share their testimonies, understanding what Maya Angelou wrote in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that *“there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”* We especially must create radically welcoming spaces for people with mental illness, reminding them that they are children of God as we help to carry the cross that they must bear. As Sarah Griffith Lund writes: *“Mental illness is a cross for all of us to bear and cannot be carried alone. Scripture says we are to ‘bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2)”* (p. 100).

And just as the angel reached out to touch, encourage, and minister in practical ways through food and drink and allowing for rest, may we at First Christian Church in Murray, KY, also offer the most precious gift we have of all, namely the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who reaches out his arms to those with mental health challenges as he lovingly welcomes them into his arms by saying: ***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*** (Matthew 11:28-30)

Closing Prayer: Today we lift up all those who are struggling with mental health challenges as we ask that you would help this church be a welcoming place for all. In the name of Jesus, who knew and experienced every human emotion that we might have, we offer up this prayer. Amen.