

September 28, 2008

How to hang on when you feel like you're at the end of your rope.

Sermon points from Power Point presentation.

- 1. It's ok to be sad...**
- 2. Ignore what "they" may say...**
- 3. Caution, Valley ahead**
- 4. Care for the whole person: eat well, sleep late, & be good to yourself!**
- 5. Facts, not feelings: Remember...and build Trust**
- 6. Wait upon the Lord...God Speaks in a still small voice**
- 7. Be honest, let it out!**
- 8. Find a friend/friends to share the load,**
- 9. Don't Forget.... You are not alone: God is with you, We are here for you**

Today continues the fall sermon series on God's answers to life's tough questions. Today's topic is How to hang on when you feel like everything is coming apart.

The topic, though not cheery, is always timely. For everyone goes through times of difficulty and emotional tumult. So, here are some of the answers that I have come up with. Today we are looking at a Biblical character who's story is right on target. That is one of the things I love about the Bible...the people in it are real folk, just like you and me. They have great successes, and abysmal failures. They are up and sometimes they are way, way down. You can find someone in here to fit just about any circumstance in life (and for those who are always thinking on the sexual side, yes, that's in here too...but that is another sermon!).

So, before we begin, a couple of quick thoughts. First, today's sermon is too long. Sorry, Harold, but there is a lot to say and Elijah's story is compelling. But I will try and move along.

Also, the first thing I would say it is that it is ok to be sad sometimes. It is also ok to be depressed sometimes...some things in life are sad, or depressing. We live in an age that denies negative emotions and we seem to not be able or willing to tolerate someone who is sad. We want to cheer them up, to make them smile and be happy...as if everyone should be happy, happy all the time. But the problem with that is that we don't live in the Stepford village, but the real world.

Now there is a difference between being sad and depressed and suffering from depression. It is more than a matter of degree, but certainly what we would call clinical depression is much, much more severe and last much longer than an "ordinary" sadness or depression.

If you are feeling sad or depressed, ask yourself honestly, is there something to be truly sad over. Not the state of world affairs, but in your life! Does your depression continue for a long time (more than 6 months), do you think of ending it all... if so, see a professional. But for the rest of us, relax. Just acknowledge what it is that is making you feel this way, and continue to move forward. But give yourself permission to be human...and to experience the whole range of emotions that come with it.

2. Don't worry about what "they" will say. Who cares if your being sad makes them uncomfortable. Are they that shallow of a friend that you have to be sunny and bubbly all the time? And there is nothing wrong with taking anti-depressants. I recommend them. If your having trouble moving forward, they really help people move out of the rut they find themselves in. Going to a mental health professional is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength and intelligence. I believe we all need some help sometimes, and you don't have to be macho and tough it out. And why do you care what other people think anyway?

I have never understood why people would look down on this category of medicine and medication anyway. Long term depression and mental illnesses are caused by brain chemistry and no different than say diabetes (which has to do with blood chemistry) or a heart condition... So, do what you need...and ignore what "they" may say.

And now from the story of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who had incredible success in his life. He was used by God to call the people to repentance and to bring a word to the king and queen from God almighty. God preformed many miracles through Elijah. In fact, today's story follows a story of where Elijah showed incredible courage and strength, and God preformed an incredible miracle in front of all the people, resulting in their eliminating the prophets of Ba'al and committing themselves to following God.

3. Caution, Valley ahead

But then Elijah heard that the evil queen Jezebel had promised to kill him because of his actions. Now Elijah had just stood up to hundred of false prophets at once and called down fire from heaven that burned up the offering, wood, stone, water and dirt! But Jezebel throws Elijah for a loop.

It is often true that the valley follows the mountain. It is often right after a great high in our lives that we find ourselves in the midst of a deep low. The higher the success or achievement, often lower the depression. Perhaps it is the let down after the success. Maybe our spirits were burning too brightly for too long, and we find ourselves completely out of gas. For whatever the reason, we need to put out one of those road signs you see driving...the yellow triangle that says steep grade, valley ahead!

4. Care for the whole person: eat well, sleep late, & be good to yourself!

So Elijah is terrified and is afraid and depressed, so he runs. He runs and runs and runs until he nearly collapses with exhaustion. He is done in, and says it is enough...I want to die, take me now Jesus! Elijah has run...but he can not run from God. He might have escaped Jezebel's reach, but God is there with him. And something extraordinary happens. God sends an angel to visit Elijah, and the angel puts him into a deep sleep. Then wakes him up to feed him...special food and water. This happens a couple of times.

God is concerned about the whole person. Not just our spiritual side. And we are one being...body, mind and spirit. God knew that Elijah was exhausted, so God provided rest for his body and mind, the deep sleep. And God provided for his body, to replenish his physical strength.

Whenever you are feeling at the end of your rope, take some time off. Relax and rest, eat well, sleep late and do something you enjoy. What we often do when we start to feel discouraged or down is to redouble our efforts. What, it's not working as well, ...try harder, work longer hours, put in more time and effort....until we find ourselves completely exhausted. Take a break! Remember, the wise wood cutter stops to sharpen the ax.

Even Jesus took time off. On several occasions, usually right after a significant high moment in the ministry, invites his disciples to come apart for a little while. There they rested, ate, slept and had fun. It is hard to think of Jesus taking a vacation or a few days off, but he did. He set the example for us. Take care of yourself...you deserve it. Angels brought Elijah honey & raisin cakes.

5. Facts, not feelings: Remember...and build Trust

Don't focus on feelings, consider the facts. Perhaps you really have botched things up. But often, in our state of mind, we exaggerate how bad things are. We allow some of the small failures to overshadow the large successes. Elijah certainly did. Here is Jezebel fuming about him and threatening him. That is not a small thing. But Elijah had done incredible things. He prayed that it might not rain and it didn't for three years...and then when he prayed for it to rain again, it did. He called down fire from heaven. He spoke the words of God himself. He fed a family on a small amount of oil and the same box of flour for three years! He was huge in the list of old testament prophets. Yet, he forget all that. He only sees the negative.

So, take an honest look at your life, and find the blessings there. Focus for awhile on what you have done well, on what makes you happy. This is not forgetting or ignoring the source of your sadness...it is simply

putting it into its proper perspective. Taking inventory is often very good for your soul. Sometimes you might ask other people you know, love and trust, to help you take inventory of all the good in your life. You will, if you are like most people, be surprised. God reminds Elijah of just some of the good things in his life and essentially calls Elijah to stop letting his feelings rule him, but to use his brain too.

One of the things that helps me in my long term struggle with chronic pain is to do this. To find things that are joyful or beautiful in every day. I have one of those electronic picture frames in the living room and on my desk that change pictures every 30 seconds...and many of the photos make me smile...when I see Susan smiling at me, or the girls mugging for the camera, it makes me smile. I try and find some beauty every day, and always have flowers on the table in the living room and dining room to remind me of the glory and beauty all around me. These are small tricks, but they have helped me.

6. Wait upon the Lord...God Speaks in a still small voice

Elijah is told to go out onto the mountain, for the Lord was going to be passing by. Elijah goes out and waits. As he waits, there is a great fire, that burns up the mountain, leaping from tree to tree. But God was not in the fire. And there was a great wind, which blew like a hurricane and shattered the rocks...but God was not in the wind. And there was an earthquake, that shook him and the rocks to the core...but God was not in the earthquake...

And then there was a gentle breeze, and he knew it was the Lord. A still, small voice whispered his name...and Elijah heard it.

We look for God in the dramatic and large and powerful, but often find God in quiet moments and gentle breezes. We need to quiet our lives and slow things down...so we can hear God's whisper. When we feel at

the end of our rope, find a place of calm and quiet and listen for God. God will whisper to you.

God to the beach with your bible and sit and watch the waves and listen for God to speak...

7. Be honest, let it out!

Once you hear the voice of God, let it all out. God calls Elijah by name and simply asks a question: "what are you doing here, Elijah". Really is it more like, "what brought you to this place...to these feelings and this anger/depression."

And Elijah lets it out. He cries and yells and stomps...letting his anger and anguish pour out to the Lord. We have this impression that our prayers must be fancy and eloquent, and that it must be flowery and beauty filled. No. God can take your anger. God can take your negative feelings and your depression. Pour it out. As I have said before, 1/3 of the psalms are laments, and some of them will surprise you...I hate them, God, I hate them! I want you to destroy them, to burn them alive or have a mountain fall on them! That's in the Bible?

Each of the lament psalms pour out a prayer that is brutally honest. But they all end in a moment of trust. As we pour it out to God, things begin to seem better. You might think it is stupid, but try it. Talk to God and really tell God how you feel. I mean really...you can tell God things that you have never told another living soul. Remember, nothing you say will surprise God...God knows it all, and loves us anyway! In spite of our faults and failures and sins...God loves us.

8. Find a friend to share the load,

Elijah's journey to recovery is almost over, as finally is this sermon! God has listened to Elijah, helped him rest and recuperate, and has

rejuvenated his soul. But God also calls Elijah to a community and to a partner. Elijah goes back to civilization with a renewed energy, but God also knows that Elijah can't do it all alone...so Elijah comes upon Elisha, who is called to be his servant, his apprentice, and his successor. So Elijah lays his mantle on Elisha and calls him from behind the plow to come to the ministry of a prophet.

Elisha is another story...but you can see his absolute commitment here...he slaughters his oxen and burns his plow (roasting the meat and feeding his fellow workers)...there is no turning back! No plow to come home to!

God brought Elijah to a place where he would find support and friendship...where he was not alone in his struggles and difficulties. It is always easier to have someone to share the load, even if it is just a friend to have a beer with and talk things over. To get some advice or just listen as you vent...

And that is why we are here. The church is a family that prays for each other, and listens to each other. Reach out, you will find friends who care here. Really. Give it a try, you don't have to go through life alone. God provided you with a faith family to support, encourage and care for each other. We are truly in this together, and God is with us.

9. Don't Forget.... You are not alone: God is with you, We are here for you

Elijah ran away, but he could not run further than God was. In the desert and on the mountain, the lord was with Elijah through out his journey...and God is with us. We can never get away from God's spirit...my favorite Psalm (#139) says "whether can I journey from your Spirit, lord. If I rise up on the wings of dawn and fly away as far as the sunrise, you are there. If I go to the highest mountain, you are there,

and if I go down to the depth of the sea...to the bottom of the Pit, you are still there. When I lie down and when I rise up, you are still with me. God never deserts us or leaves us. He is always there. And we are here too. We are in this together, and this is the one place you can be however you are...happy or sad, up or down, we will accept you and try and help you. We are only human, but we aren't going anywhere. We don't give up on each other...or ourselves. The church is one of God's great gifts in times of trouble. We are not alone.