

Good morning. I am grateful to be with you. I appreciate Shawn inviting me to preach. The fact that Shawn invited me says more about him than it does about me. Shawn and I have known each other for the last five years going back to when we were in the same graduate studies cohort. Since then, Shawn has been one of my biggest encouragers and connected me with opportunities to grow. I know you know how blessed you are to have Shawn serving among you as your lead minister.

When Shawn asked me to preach, he did not assign me a text or topic, which means I can talk about anything. I want to share with you a story in the Bible that has impacted me. If you want to join me in your own Bible or in your Bible app, the story is in **1 Kings 19**.

I have two stools up here. The first stool [on my right] represents your experiences. The second stool [on my left] represents your expectations. *Sometimes there is a gap between what we expect and what we experience.*

You expected your life to look different. You expected your leadership to influence others. You expected your health to be better. You expected the offer to be accepted. You expected to get a call back. You expected your paycheck to increase. You expected the pregnancy test to be positive. You expected your marriage to hold on. You expected your children to follow in your footsteps. You expected this preacher to be your favorite Hoosier preacher. *Sometimes there is a gap between what we expect and what we experience.*

Sometimes there is a gap between who we expect God to be and who we experience Him to be. We expect a loving God to comfort us, yet we experience so much pain. We expect a powerful God to protect us, yet we feel vulnerable and hopeless. We expect a God who knows all things to guide us, but we feel confused and lost. *This gap is what the Bible calls the wilderness.*

I want to tell you the story of a man whose experience did not match his expectations. The man's name was Elijah. Elijah was chosen by God to be a prophet. This means Elijah spoke on behalf of God to His people. Elijah confronted the wicked king Ahab and queen Jezebel. Elijah proclaimed there would be a drought (and famine) for a few years. Elijah provided flour and oil for a poor widow and her son to sustain them during the drought (and famine). Elijah even raised the boy from the dead. He defeated 850 false prophets in a head-to-head battle on Mount Carmel by calling down fire from heaven to consume his offering that had been soaked in water. Elijah was a big deal. He had experienced "success." And he expected to continue to do big things for God.

However, in 1 Kings 19, he experiences something that does not match his expectations. ¹ *Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."* (1 Kings 19:1-2)

Ahab and Jezebel were wicked. We are told a couple chapters earlier, ³³ *Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him. (1 Kings 16:33)*

In fact, they had made it their mission to put to death any prophets of God. After Elijah proclaimed there would be a drought, God led Elijah into the wilderness east of the Jordan River to protect him from being killed by Ahab and Jezebel. Over the next few years, Ahab and Jezebel

sent soldiers to look high and low for Elijah because they blamed him for the drought and famine. Eventually, God told Elijah to leave the wilderness and go to Mount Carmel.

After his victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah told Ahab to return home, and Elijah would meet him there. Elijah probably thought that this would be the turning point for the nation because God had proven He alone was God. Ahab and Jezebel would repent of their idolatry and turn to God. This is what he prays on Mount Carmel, *³⁷ Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.* (1 Kings 18:37) After years in the wilderness, Elijah probably thought he had crossed the finish line. But that didn't happen.

In response to that humiliating defeat, Jezebel essentially says, "I will kill you, even if it kills me." This triggered something in Elijah.

^{3a} Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. (1 Kings 19:3a)

Elijah had every reason to trust God. God had demonstrated his power over all the other gods, over kings and queens, and even over creation itself. God had spoken to him and through him. Even after all Elijah had seen, heard, and done, he is afraid and runs away. Before Elijah stayed in the fight against the prophets of Baal. *Now he taps out and exits the ring and enters the wilderness... again.*

All of us run when we are afraid. Some of us run to our room. Some of us run to the couch. Some of us run to work. Some of us run to food. Some of us run to alcohol. Some of us run to pornography. Some of us run to social media. Some of us run to the TV. When we are in the gap between what we expect and what we experience, we run.

Younger generations especially love to travel. They grow up and want to move away to the city where they can meet new people, eat new food, and enjoy new experiences. They are discontent with where they are, even with what they have, and so they go in search of it someplace else. The word that describes this is wanderlust. Wanderlust is a natural impulse to change where you are. It is literally a "lust" to "wander." Wanderlust is wanting to be anywhere but here. Do you want to be anywhere but here? Are you waiting for something painful to be over? Are you hoping for something good to happen? Are you looking for questions to be answered? Are you ready to get out or give up?

^{3b} When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ^{4a} while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. (1 Kings 19:3b-4a)

Did you notice where Elijah ran? He ran into the wilderness. The Bible uses settings and surroundings to picture the state of someone's soul. *Elijah is in the wilderness literally and metaphorically.* Elijah is in the gap between what he expected and what he experienced. He is facing conflict. He needs food, water, and shelter. He is waiting on God to accomplish His plan.

Elijah has been *here* before. God had led him into the wilderness to hide. But now, he runs into the wilderness on his own.

There are four words that describe how many of us feel when we are in the wilderness: *anxious, afraid, angry, and alone.* We feel anxious, afraid, angry, and alone when we are in the gap between what we expect and what we experience. We look back at the first stool and ask, "why?" *Why did that happen?* We look forward at the second stool and asks, "What if?" *What if things only get worse?* Elijah is in the wilderness.

Who went with him? No one. He left his servant in the town of Beersheba. No close friend and no cell phone. He isolated himself from others. We do so the same. We pull away from people when we are in the gap.

^{4b} He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” ^{5a} Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. (1 Kings 19:4b-5a)

Elijah prays. But he does not pray anything that sounds like how Jesus taught us to pray. He doesn't pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” He doesn't pray, “Lead me not into temptation.” He doesn't pray, “Deliver me from evil.” He doesn't pray, “Work all this together for good.” His prayer is, *“I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”*

He is not just exhausted physically, but he is exhausted emotionally. Elijah's words may express feeling shame. Perhaps he is ashamed he ran away. Perhaps he is ashamed he is exhausted. Perhaps he is ashamed that he couldn't influence change like he hoped.

^{5b} All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. (1 Kings 19:5b-6)

God answers Elijah's prayer. But he does not answer it according to what Elijah wants. God answers it according to what Elijah needs. God understood that Elijah was physically and emotionally exhausted. What Elijah needs most is some fresh bread, clean water, and a long nap.

⁷ The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ^{9a} There he went into a cave and spent the night. (1 Kings 19:7-9a)

It took two naps and two meals to strengthen Elijah for the journey. And a journey it was. He traveled 40 days and 40 nights and covered roughly 250 miles. This was the same amount of time that God had sustained Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus in the wilderness. Speaking of Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, is another name for Mount Sinai. **God has met his people here before.**

Elijah may have journeyed to Mount Sinai because he wanted to encounter God in the same way that Moses did. After all, God revealed his glory to Moses on this mountain. This is the place where God met his people. The last time Elijah was on a mountain was Mount Carmel when God rained fire from heaven. Elijah may have been looking for another mountaintop moment.

After the long journey, Elijah went into a cave and fell asleep. *What does God do? ^{9b} And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9b)*

What I want you to notice are not the words but the **punctuation**. **God asks Elijah a question.** Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer or receive is a question spoken by someone who loves us. *“What happened? What is wrong? How are you feeling?”* **God invited Elijah to voice how he felt.**

10 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” (1 Kings 19:10)

Elijah knows that what he says is not true. Only weeks prior, a man named Obadiah had told him that he had hid 100 prophets in two caves to protect them from being killed (1 Kings 18:4). *Isn't this how we respond when we are anxious, afraid, angry, and alone?* We exaggerate.

Underneath his exaggeration, Elijah is saying, “After all I have done for you, is this how you are going to repay me? I have poured myself out and now I have nothing left. How can you leave me *alone* like this?”

A recent survey, which polled over 1,500 youth between the ages of 13-19 nationwide, revealed that **67% of teens feel pressure to keep feelings to themselves**. This is when 55% of teens say they've experienced anxiety, 45% excessive stress, and 43% depression.¹

God invites us to talk to Him. He invites us to express how we feel, even our anxiety, our fear, and our anger.

11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ^{12a} After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. (1 Kings 19:11-12a)

God's presence was not revealed in the way Elijah expected. God's presence had appeared in powerful winds before. God's presence had appeared in earthquakes before. God's presence had appeared in fire before. But God was not in any of these things.

God told Elijah to go out of the cave and stand on the mountain. But Elijah does not move. He stays in the cave. He doesn't move when the mountain around him begins to shake and the rocks above him begin to shatter. He doesn't move when the ground beneath him begins to quake. He doesn't move when flames arise and make him sweat. If the mountain comes down on him or the fire enters the cave and consumes him, he will get what he asked for: ***“I have had enough, Lord. Take my life.”*** What made him go out of the cave was what followed.

12b And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. (1 Kings 19:12b-13)

What made Elijah go out of the cave was the gentle whisper that followed. A literal translation of the Hebrew reads, *“the sound of gentle silence.”* [pause] Here's the thing. Elijah was not listening for God's voice. God had just asked Elijah a question and then told him, ***“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”*** **Elijah was not listening for God's voice. He was looking for God's presence.** God did not reveal his presence in a strong wind, nor in a mighty earthquake, nor in blazing fire. **God's presence was revealed in a gentle whisper – the sound of gentle silence.**

God may be communicating that he wants Elijah to draw near to Him. *What do we do when someone whispers? **We lean in.** What if the moments in life that make us want to run are the very moments that God wants us to draw near to Him?*

¹ <https://4-h.org/about/blog/new-survey-finds-7-in-10-teens-are-struggling-with-mental-health/>

Then God asks Elijah the exact same question and Elijah gives the exact same response.

^{13b} *Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:13b)*

Why the repetition? Why does God ask the same question? The words are the same, but the context is different. God first asked this question while Elijah was in the cave. He was speaking to Elijah’s emotions. “*Why are you in this cave?*” He is inviting Elijah to express his fear, disappointment, and grief. Now he asks the same question while Elijah is standing outside the cave. God is speaking to Elijah’s will. “*Why are you a prophet?*” He is wanting Elijah to remember his *purpose*.

¹⁴ *He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” (1 Kings 19:14)*

Elijah’s words communicate how he feels. But they also communicate what people need. God called Elijah to his ministry because of the need for a rebellious people to repent and turn to God. Elijah was in pain. But God helps him realize that his purpose mattered more than his pain.

I was on the soccer team in college. I was at the bottom of the roster my first year. I was timid, like Timothy. But I was part of something bigger than myself, and it mattered to me. And so, I trained hard. Before classes started in the fall, we arrived early to campus for preseason training. One of my favorite memories was running about a mile from the campus in downtown Chicago to the beach of Lake Michigan and running sprints back and forth in the sand. My muscles burned. My body ached. But what I was training for mattered more to me than the pain.

The things we run to, what we often call addictions, are often placeholders for a lack of purpose. Research has revealed that “men were seven times more likely to escalate their pornography use if they lacked purpose in their lives.” Here is what one study concluded: “You cannot change your relationship to pornography if you do not have an effective plan for engaging the lack of purpose in your life. Pornography is not an isolated struggle; it is a symptom of a much larger issue of futility.”² *When we lean into God, He reminds us of our identity and purpose.*

This is the process that Elijah went through: *Anxiety/Fear – Isolation – Anger – Exhaustion*. Something happened that did not meet his expectations. His anxiety and fear led him to run. He left everyone behind. He became angry. He felt exhausted. *How does God help him?*

¹⁵ *The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19:15-18)*

God restores him by walking him back through the process. God addresses his *exhaustion* by giving him food, water, and rest for his journey. God addresses his *anger* by asking him a question. God addresses his *isolation* by reminding him that God himself is with him and that there are 7,000 other men and women in Israel who have not pledged allegiance to false gods. God even tells him about three men who will take on the mantle of accomplishing God’s will. The Aramean king, Hazael, will be God’s instrument of judgment on Israel. Jehu will become the new king of Israel, replacing the current king Ahab. Elisha will be Elijah’s successor, continuing the prophetic

² Stringer, Jay. *Unwanted*.

work of Elijah. Finally, God addresses his *anxiety/fear* by reminding him of his *identity* and *purpose*.

Elijah's response (his fear and anxiety, his isolation and anger, his exhaustion and despair) did not disqualify him. God does not strip Elijah of his call to be a prophet. Elijah continues to fulfill his role as God's messenger for years. Even the kings of Israel consider him a "man of God." We are told that both the prophet Elisha and John the Baptist ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). James, the brother of Jesus, pointed to Elijah when talking about the power of prayer. When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John on a mountain, Elijah appears with Moses and talks with Jesus. Elijah was the only person taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire without dying (2 Kings 2:9-12).

Elijah ran. But God ran after him. Elijah spoke some strong words. But God's grace was strong enough to listen. Elijah was in the depths of despair. But God's love was deeper still.

When you are in the wilderness, your first response will be to listen for God's voice. You want to be anywhere but here. You want to hear directions how to get out. You want your experiences to change. ***Being in the wilderness is not about closing the gap. Being in the wilderness is about leaning into God who is with us.***

Listen to these words from Elizabeth Elliott: "In my own life, I think I can honestly say that out of the deepest pain has come the strongest conviction of the presence of God, and the love of God."

I have two stools up here. The first stool [on my right] represents your experiences. The second stool [on my left] represents your expectations. Sometimes there is a gap between what we expect and what we experience.

The first stool represents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. We experience the pain and brokenness of a fallen world cursed by sin.

The second stool represents the tree of life growing in the New Creation. We expect Jesus to return and make all things new, whole, and right.

We live in this gap between two these two trees. We live in the wilderness. We experience the *pain* of the first tree. We expect the *promise* of the second tree.

But there is another tree. This tree stands in the middle and reaches out to bridge the gap. ***This tree is the cross.*** The cross reminds us of God's love. The extent of what someone is willing to suffer pictures the depth of their love. ***The extent of Jesus's suffering represents the depth of his love.***

When our experience is fear, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

When our experience is loneliness, Jesus says, "I am with you."

When our experience is anger, Jesus says, "I am gentle and humble in heart."

When our experience is exhaustion, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

When our experience is anxiety, Jesus says, "I love you. You do not need to earn my love. My grace is sufficient."

You may want to be anywhere but *here*... in the gap between these two trees. *Here* may be a painful place. *Here* may be full of uncertainty. *Here* may be dark and desolate. ***But here is where Jesus is.*** He is *here* in the wilderness with you. He is *here* on the cross for you.