

As we mentioned at the start of the service today, for the month of June, we're doing a sermon series called Everybody Hurts Sometimes. The inspiration for this series and format comes not in response to any particular event, but rather from general observations of those who serve in our congregation's ministries of pastoral care, who have noted that divorce, suicide, addiction, and domestic abuse are issues that have or will affect nearly every person in our community in some way.

Of course, there is nothing exclusively Christian about these topics – they have or will affect everyone with whom we share this planet. And I am by no means an expert on any of these subjects. And so as I see it, my role as a preacher is to put these topics into conversation with biblical texts and our Presbyterian theological tradition.

And so I will necessarily be doing a great deal of what preachers call eisegesis in these sermons. I am beginning with a particular topic in mind and then seeking out biblical texts that speak to that topic. There is nothing inherently wrong in such an approach, but it often lends itself to the preacher's personal views and biases crowding their way into the task of proclamation of the Word, which may or may not always be in line with the Holy Spirit. So as always, my prayer is that where my words are the words of the Spirit, they might take root and be watered and bear good fruit that will last, and where my words are not the

words of the Spirit, they may be scattered and quickly forgotten.

Our story for this morning comes to us from the book of 1 Kings, and it centers on a man named Elijah. Elijah was born in Israel about 900 years before Jesus, during a time of tremendous upheaval and uncertainty in the Land of Promise.

It was a time of deep division and violence and civil war, as ten of the original twelve tribes of Israel split off to form what scholars refer to as the Northern Kingdom, and the remaining tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the Southern Kingdom.

Most of the Book of 1 Kings centers on the reigns of the kings who ruled over the northern kingdom, and well, it's not a good report, not good at all. The northern kings essentially tried to outdo each another breaking more commandments than their predecessors did. They did not worship the Lord alone. They turned aside to worship other gods, and they created shrines and idols to them in the Land of Promise. They refused their responsibilities to look out for the widow and the orphans in their land, and they used their power to satisfy their every physical desire.

Nevertheless, God kept trying to call God's people back to God's ways of being in the world, and God sent prophets to speak God's truth to the northern kings and their subjects.

One such prophet of God was a man named Elijah. In 1 Kings, Elijah is

portrayed battling the prophets of the foreign gods much in the same way that David is portrayed battling Goliath in 1 Samuel. He's young, he's outnumbered and outgunned, and yet he stands his ground and boldly proclaims the Word of God, and God is with him, and he has success.

But whereas after David defeated Goliath, he eventually became king over a united kingdom, after Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal, he was forced to run for his life, for Queen Jezebel had declared Elijah to be public enemy number one.

And so Elijah, exhausted, terrified, full of pain and sadness, and utterly alone in the world, went a day's journey into the wilderness and sat down and said a solemn prayer to God.

So listen now for a Word from God from 1 Kings 19, beginning at the fourth verse.

*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." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It is enough. Now take away my life.

As we know all too well from our own lived experiences, as Elijah himself

experienced, being a person of faith, being God's person in and for the world, does not exempt us from the pain, suffering, and sorrow that all human beings experience. As we know all too well from our own lived experiences, everybody hurts sometimes.

Suicide, the act of intentionally harming oneself with the intent to kill oneself, has been part of human life for as long as there have been humans. Different cultures and civilizations have taken different views as to whether or not it's honorable or shameful. In certain cases in certain cultures, such as ancient Greece or in the pre-Colombian Americas, some forms of suicides were proscribed rather than prohibited. Even within the biblical story itself, there are seven people who are reported to have died by suicide, including Saul, the first of ancient Israel's kings, and Judas, one of Jesus' original 12 apostles.

So if suicide has been around as long as humans have been around, what, if anything, can we say about it as modern people of faith?

First, I think it's vitally important that we recognize that for at least some of us, there has or will come a point in our lives where we speak the words that the prophet Elijah spoke. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

For some of us, if not most of us, we have or will come to a point in our lives where we are exhausted, afraid, full of pain, and we feel so utterly alone, and the thought of ending our lives or at

least asking God to end it crosses our minds.

It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.

Elijah, the man who spoke those words was not a coward, nor had he turned his back on God. He had battled for God. He had spoken God's truth to the king and queen at the risk of his own life. He had performed God's deeds of power, literally calling down fire from heaven. A thousand years later, Jesus took Peter and James and John up a mountain to pray, and while he was praying, he was transfigured before them, and his clothes and face became as bright as the sun, and suddenly there were two more men there on the mountain speaking with Jesus. One was Moses, and the other was this very same Elijah, the same one who said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

My friend, if you have or ever do come to a point in your life where you are exhausted, terrified, full of pain, and feel utterly alone, and those words cross your mind or your lips, know that you are not the first child of God to have ever had that experience, nor will you be the last. Know that if those words cross your mind or your lips, it does not mean that you are a coward or that you have turned your back on God or that you're anything other than a human being, made in the very image of God.

But I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that throughout history, the church has struggled both theologically and

pastorally with the issue of suicide, whether the attempt was carried out or not. For many years, the official position of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters was that suicide was so great a sin that it would delay or even preclude one's entry into heaven, although they have backed away from that position in recent years. But even among our Protestant siblings not so very long ago, those who died by suicide were sometimes not allowed to have their bodies laid to rest in church cemeteries. Those who survived suicide attempts sometimes faced criminal charges, and they and their families were often ostracized in their communities, and sadly in some cases, still are to this very day.

So with that in mind, let us continue with our reading from 1 Kings 19, again picking up at verse 4.

*Elijah 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." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. 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. 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." 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.*

This, too, is the Word of God for the people of God.

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we are confessional – that is, there are some documents we call confessions of faith that are the lenses through which we read Scripture. One of those documents is called the Apostles' Creed, which Christians have been using to shape and guide our faith for at least 1,600 years. Here at First Presbyterian Church, it's the confession that we recite in worship most often, and it's the one with which we are most familiar.

There's a line in the creed about Jesus' death and resurrection that sometimes catches people's attention. It says, I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty, from thence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.

Those four words, "He descended into hell," have been the subject of no small amount of theological debate over the centuries. In fact, some of our sisters and brothers in other branches of the church family tree have chosen to omit those four words when they recite the Apostles' Creed.

But I for one am glad that they are there and that we Presbyterians continue to recite and affirm them. Because in my own practice of ministry, I have been with people who have been living in a kind of hell right here on earth. I have been with people who are suicidal, and I have witnessed the hell on earth of grief and anger and fear and shame that suicide creates for the friends and family who survive them.

Thank God that the creed reminds us all that he descended into hell, reminding us that there is no place, either above the earth or on the earth or even under the earth, that is unreachable by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Heaven forbid it, but should we, as people of faith, be affected by the death by suicide of someone we know and love, we can and should grieve their death as if it came by any other means. We should mourn them and grieve them, and we should gather to worship God in a service of Witness to the Resurrection as we do for all of our sisters and brothers who have died and joined the Church Triumphant. As people of faith, we are not exempt or immune from those feelings. But as people of resurrection faith, we remember that the founder of our faith went through hell for us. The founder of our faith died for us. The founder of our faith was raised again for us. And even when we find ourselves utterly alone, exhausted, afraid, when the darkness closes in all around, even now, the founder of our faith prays for us.

We worship and serve a God who is with us, even in the most barren wildernesses of this life. When Elijah came to a point in his life and asked that he might die, when Elijah said, “It is enough,” God did not smite him or chastise him or reject him. Elijah lay down to sleep, and when he woke up, there on a stone were hot cakes, and a jar of water.

Bread. Water. Elemental things. Sacramental things. Sustenance for the journey. A means of grace. Signs and symbols of God’s presence with us, even in the wilderness, even when we say, “It is enough, O Lord.”

A thousand years after Elijah, a man named Paul wrote a letter to some friends of his who were struggling to be faithful to the ways of God in the midst of a world gone mad. Paul himself had more than once come to a place of utter exhaustion, pain, and fear. Over the course of two decades of preaching, teaching, and planting churches across the ancient world, he had argued with friends, and had friends break fellowship with him. He had been beaten and left for dead, locked up more times than he could count, and even shipwrecked. He knew what it was to speak the words, “It is enough, O Lord.”

But he also wrote these words to his friends in Rome. He wasn’t writing specifically about suicide or its aftermath, but as we think today about suicide and its implications for our lives together as people of faith, they speak to us.

So listen now for a Word from God from Romans 8:31-39.

*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,*

*‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;*

*we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.