**When We Can’t Go On**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

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There has been no definition of stress that everyone accepts. Therefore, it’s difficult to measure stress if there is no agreement on what the definition of stress should be. People have very different ideas with respect to their definition of stress. Probably the most common is, “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension”. Another popular definition of stress is, “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

Most people consider the definition of stress to be something that causes distress. However, stress is not always harmful since increased stress results in increased productivity. A definition of stress should also embrace this type of healthy stress, which is usually ignored. For example, getting a promotion at work adds stress but it has a positive connotation. A young couple having a baby is a blessing but it certainly causes stress. These positive times of stress is called eustress.

On the other hand, there are negative stresses in our lives that cause distress. To say the least, divorce is a distress. Financial problems or work difficulties can be stressful in negative ways. In addition, there are the chronic stresses of life like bills, kids, jobs, and health that if left unchecked can cause physical and emotional harm in our lives.

Each of us has to find ways to manage the stress of life to remain physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy. For example, a group of high-tech workers in Seattle recently took part in a day called "Unplug and Recharge in Nature." After spending so much time in the information-loaded virtual world, they felt a need to reconnect with the tree-filled real world.

One guy complained that he's hit by 10,000 e-mails a day. Another confessed that he's typically online as much as 18 hours at a time. Recent studies have found that people spend as much as five to seven hours a day in front of a screen, and are checking their smartphones several times an hour. Technology can make our lives easier, but it also can cause a great deal of negative stress.

So these Seattle high-tech workers spent a day in nature, sitting still and paying attention to the real world instead of the virtual one. They unplug and recharge through an experience of "forest bathing." Research is beginning to show that this kind of bathing in your birthday suit in nature is associated with lower stress levels and better moods, as well as an increase in self-esteem, physical fitness, memory, attention and creativity.

In a sense this is what Elijah does when he sits down under a broom tree. His mind wasn’t on relaxation. Rather his mind was on eternal rest. Nonetheless, Elijah retreated into nature. But before we look at what happened to Elijah when he retreated to nature, we have to recall the events that led to the distress he felt under the tree.

Due to the evil leadership of King Ahab and the disobedience of the Israelites, there was a great famine in the land. Ahab and Jezebel worshipped the false god, Ba’al and led the people of Israel to do the same. Elijah was sent to Samaria to confront Ahab and to show who the one true God really is.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged Ahab and 450 prophets of Ba’al to a little contest. Two altars would be built, one for Ba’al and one for Yahweh. A bull would be sacrificed on each altar and the prophets would call on their respective god to bring down fire on the altar to determine the one true God. Elijah was so confident, he allowed the 450 prophets of Ba’al to get a head start. The altar was built for Ba’al and the sacrificial bull was placed on top. The prophets called the on the name of Ba’al and danced around the altar all morning with no response.

Meanwhile, Elijah taunted the prophets of Ba’al. “Shout louder!” “Surely he is a god! Maybe he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:27) The prophets of Ba’al shouted louder, cut themselves with swords and spears to show the gravity of the situation. Yet, there was no fire.

When evening came, Elijah gathered some of the Israelites who were watching the contest to help build the altar to Yahweh. They took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to form the altar and then placed the bull on top of some wood. It would’ve been easy enough to show the power of Yahweh at that point but Elijah wanted to make sure everyone saw the extent of God’s power. He had four large jars filled with water and poured it on top of the wood not just once but three times. While he had everyone’s attention, Elijah stepped forward and prayed for God to answer his prayer so that everyone would know Yahweh was the true Lord of all and God answered.

Upon winning, the 450 prophets were put to death but Ahab was spared. Elijah told Ahab to go back home to eat and drink because the Lord was going to end the drought in the land. Elijah then went back on the top of Mount Carmel to pray and to wait for God to send rain. God made good on his promise of rain.

Meanwhile, when Ahab got home, he told Jezebel of all that had happened. Incensed that Elijah had embarrassed her husband, Jezebel sent word to Elijah that his time on earth was short, that within 24 hours, he would experience the same fate as that of the prophets of Ba’al. So Elijah did what most of us would’ve done; he ran. He ran to Beersheba, left his servant there and then walked further into the desert until he could travel no further. He found a broom tree (a large desert bush with lots of overhang), crawled underneath it and prayed that God would go ahead and take his life.

Think about Elijah’s last couple of days. He went to the king of Israel and his 450 prophets, challenged them to a duel, made fun of them during the contest, easily showed off the power of God through fire and took out all of Ba’al’s prophets. God gave him the courage and strength when the odds were against him. He should’ve been on top of the world but as soon as Jezebel makes a threat to kill him, he runs and wants God to go ahead and take his life. Elijah felt his stress was more than he could handle.

Ever feel like Elijah? I would dare say that most of us have felt distressed like him. Maybe it was the pain of losing a loved one. Maybe it was when the doctor came in the room and told you that you had cancer. Maybe it was during the divorce proceedings. Whatever it may have been, all of us have felt at our wits end. Some of us may have felt so hopeless that you may have prayed the same prayer that Elijah prayed: “I’ve had enough Lord. Take my life.”

On a side note, I want to be sensitive to those who are going through difficult times. There is no easy answer to difficult times in our lives. The Church for too long has tried to trivialize difficult times with pat answers: just pray a little more, just read the Bible more because the answer is in there. The answer just isn’t that easy. When life seems hopeless, I want you to know God is hope but that hope can seem distant. Depression is powerful and can cloud our vision for the future. Sometimes in church, we feel like we have to have it all together but that just isn’t reality. The truth is all of us are broken. All of us have issues we deal with and none of us have it all together. So if you need help, ask! We are all here to help one another through life’s struggles, no matter what it might be. When the help of professionals are needed, we will walk with you through the journey. When medical help is needed, we will help you find the right doctors. God reveals hope in many different ways. Hope can be found in medicine. Hope can be found in encouraging words of a friend. Hope can be found in a caring church. Hope can be found in our faith that is grounded in knowing that the Holy Spirit is always with us.

When life spins out of control and it seems we can’t go on any longer, there is hope because God cares for our physical needs. We need to take care of our physical needs to handle the stress in our lives. First, we need to make sure we get the proper amount of sleep. God allowed Elijah to sleep when he felt like he just wanted to die. A restful sleep does wonders for our bodies and our minds. Next we need to have the right nutrition and hydration. When our bodies feel strong, our outlook changes. God provided enough hot baked-bread and water for Elijah for him to travel forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb where God provided shelter in a cave. Not sure walking for forty days and forty nights is the right exercise program but some sort of physical activity is good for all of us. Stress is more manageable when our physical needs are met.

Second, we know there is hope when we are focused on listening. When Elijah was in the cave, the Lord asked why he was there. After telling God why, Elijah was told to go out unto the mountain to experience the presence of God. Powerful winds came and the Lord was not there. An earthquake ripped through the earth but God was not there. A great fire came but God was not there either. Finally, there came a gentle whisper and Elijah finally experienced the presence of God.

There is a lot of noise in our world. We live in the 24-hour news cycle. We are constantly inundated with noise from our world. We also live in a world where hurriedness and productivity is not only rewarded but also expected. It is hard to slow down enough to hear the voice of God speak. If we are to properly handle the stress of life, we need to learn to slow down and listen. (I’m preaching to myself right now.) Listen for God’s voice. More than likely, it will not be found in the roars of a crowd or in the noise of the media but rather in the gentle whisper of our hearts or in the caring voice of a friend. We need to learn to create the space for God to speak in our lives.

After Elijah recognized God’s voice in the gentle whisper, God told him his plan. “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus…” Elijah heard the plan for his successor as Israel’s prophet to be Elisha. When Elijah thought he couldn’t go on any longer and wanted for God to take his life, God showed up in ordinary ways. He provided rest. He provided physical sustenance. He provided hope through a gentle whisper. God does the same for us today. Often, we want God to show up in our lives in extravagant ways. We want him to reveal himself on a billboard as if God was Pedro going toward South of the Border on I-95. It doesn’t necessarily take extra-ordinary measures like “forest bathing” to de-stress. (although if that floats your boat, go for it!) But, when we can’t go on, God usually shows up in ordinary ways. Look for him there!