

Wilderness Living, a sermon in response to 1 Kings 19:1-15a, Psalm 42, and Luke 8:26-39 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, June 23, 2019.

I saw a cartoon recently with a man sitting at a desk labeled “Help Desk.” In the first frame, he answers the phone, “Help Desk, How may I help you?” The voice on the other end says, “Yes, I need help! My kid refuses to sleep in his own room.” “Oh, that’s normal,” the man says, “just switch rooms with him for a few nights so he can see there’s nothing to be afraid of.” ... Then through the phone: “Are you kidding? *I’M* not sleeping in there – there’s **monsters** in the closet.” +++ +++ Another cartoon shows a father tucking his son into bed when the child says, “Dad, are there **monsters** under my bed?” ... “Probably not,” his dad answers, “we all know that **monsters** live in your **closet**. Under the bed is more for flesh-eating **skeletons** and weird half-bodied **zombies** that feed on children’s brains... But no **monsters**... **Good Night!**” +++ +++ Monsters in the closet – it’s one of the most persistent images in cultures across the world. We joke about it, but how many adults are there who refuse to sleep with a foot hanging off the side of the bed – or insist on having a closet or bathroom door open? +++ Maybe “monsters in the closet” just reflects a common fear of the dark – but I think there’s more to it than that. We each seem to carry our **own** darkness – our **own** fretfulness and **dread**... – our **own** anxiety – **our own monsters** around with us everywhere we go.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in 2017, over 46 million people in the United States experienced mental health issues, and **less than half of them** received the treatment they needed; that includes the **50%** of all adolescents with a mental disorder... **50%**! +++ In addition, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports that 19.7 million Americans at least 12 years old battled substance abuse disorder in 2017. Of these, 74% struggled with alcohol. About 38% **of all adults** battled an illicit drug use disorder. +++ And, of course, there is overlap – 8.5 million Americans suffered from **both** a mental health disorder **and** substance abuse. +++ +++ It’s staggering, really:: Anxiety... Depression... Addiction... +++ No wonder there are monsters in our closets! +++ And these are just a **few** of the many dark roads that we here in this sanctuary, we and the people all around us – our loved ones and neighbors – these are just **a few** of the many dark roads we navigate every day. It’s as though underneath the ordered, polite, predictable surface world, we each have another world... **a personal** world of unsettled chaos and apprehension, reaching up to pull us below the surface if it can. +++ +++ This is pervasive. It’s part of our lives as human beings – yet it’s so **personal** that you feel like you are the only one traveling those dark roads. And then, – when you turn to the scriptures for comfort – you have a burning question:: “How does **God** show up in the darkness I face? What does the **Bible** say about it? How do I know I’m not as alone as I feel!” +++ *All* good questions about living in the Wilderness...

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But, you know, unfortunately, it seems like too often the answers people give you to those questions end up making things worse instead of better:: “If you pray hard enough God will make it go away.” ... “Just turn it all over to the Lord and then you can put your mind at ease.” ... So you pray – ... you turn it over – you lift it up – **but the darkness persists**. And so, you conclude, it must be **your** fault. **You** aren’t praying hard enough. **Your** faith isn’t strong enough. Or worse – **you** just aren’t important to God. +++ **But that couldn’t be further from the truth!**

Today’s scripture readings have a lot to say about mental illness – about despair – **and about coping**. Let’s look first at Elijah. When we read a narrative like Elijah’s wilderness sojourn, it’s easy to see just another story: “Elijah went on a long and difficult trip to a mountain, and there he found God.” But let’s look deeper at what was going on in his life – and in his mind – to discover if his **real** despair was actually coming from within. +++ For some time now, Elijah has been in serious conflict with King Ahab and his Sidonian wife Jezebel, who turned the king to worshiping the pagan god Baal. Recently, Elijah had found himself the only prophet in all Israel remaining loyal to the one true God – and he had demonstrated the overwhelming power of his God by challenging, defeating, then personally killing 450 prophets of Baal. Many people saw the error of their ways and turned back to God. But what **should** have been his greatest triumph was diminished by his own self-doubt – **his feeling that God was still not present for him in his own life**... And so, when he learned

that Jezebel wanted to kill him – instead of standing up to her after his great victory, Elijah fled into the wilderness. That’s where *our* reading picks up the story. +++ Elijah – alone in his own wilderness – with no particular destination in mind. After **just one day**, he sinks down under a bush, pleads with God to just let him die, and goes to sleep – presuming it to be for the last time. +++ Oh, for the peace of escape – it can be so tantalizing, can’t it? ... But God sends an angel. +++ Now, the reader might expect the angel to serve a banquet and heal his weary soul – **but NO** – *that’s not what happens*. Through the angel, God *nudges* Elijah back from death **just enough** for him to keep going. **Just enough** shade, **enough** food and water, **just enough** peace of mind – to survive another day and continue his journey ***even deeper into the wilderness***. ... But even **then**, even **after** the angel’s visit when Elijah **has** some food and water in his belly, he just lays back down again – still wanting nothing more than sleep... and death. +++ +++ ***Elijah’s journey must sound familiar to anyone suffering from mental illness or addiction:: Despite everything else good that might be going on in your life – I mean, Elijah is THE most important prophet of the Old Testament after Moses – but still – despite all that – the Wilderness just has a way of taking over.*** +++ +++ So there’s Elijah – giving himself up again to sleep and death. The angel has to wake him up a **second time** to send him on his way. +++ Elijah’s problems aren’t solved. He has no new sense of optimism – no renewed power. ... And so he wanders on because there is nothing else he can do. If anything, things are getting **worse**. This time, Elijah wanders for 40 days and 40 nights without any more food or water – until he finds himself at Horeb, the mount of God.

Also called Mount Sinai, in the Old Testament, Horeb, more than any other place, is known to resonate with the presence of the Divine. It is where Moses was called by God at the burning bush – and where he received the 10 Commandments. *Now* the Lord’s own voice tells Elijah to **seek out** the presence of God here on that same mountain. +++ When your Wilderness Living cuts you off from the world – makes you feel desperately alone – you have to actually **look** for God. +++ But where do you even look – when you’re carrying such heavy burdens – when you’ve forgotten what it’s like to **feel** the presence of God in your life? +++ I’ll bet Elijah would have been happy in that moment if God **had** made some grand appearance in the first places he looks:: in the dangerous winds, the earthquake, or the fire:: appearing in smoke and flame like the **Great Oz**, to declare that all Elijah’s torments were healed. ... But no... instead, the voice of God comes in... “*the sound of sheer silence.*” **And Elijah hears it** – +++ +++ and he stops. +++ +++ The scripture tells us he pulls his cloak up around his face +++ and ... just *stands* there,... at the entrance to the cave – listening to the sheer silence. +++ +++ +++ I imagine this is the first moment of real peace Elijah has had in a long time – maybe the first time he’s noticed there’s a pretty nice view from this vantage point – and felt the breeze upon his cheek... **The silence of that moment**... when he knows that God is with **him**, not in some grand dramatic show – NO – God is somehow **wrapped up** in Elijah’s solitude – **wrapped up** in his despair – and has quietly **been there** all along... **The silence of that moment**... allows Elijah to set aside the troubles still waiting for him back in Israel – the **silence of that moment** allows him to set aside the **anxieties** that followed him into the wilderness – that live with him everywhere he goes – depression that made him want to die sitting under that solitary broom tree. But finally, in the silence of that moment, he can set it **all** aside – not solve it once and for all – not make it go away – just **set it aside** +++ **for the moment** +++ and take a breath.... +++ +++ I think we all need that moment – especially if depression is a part of our life – or anxiety – or addiction – or grief:: ((I think even that short list includes pretty much all of us here))... We all need that moment of silence – to remember that your loving God is wrapped up in **your** solitude – wrapped up in **your** despair – in **your** grief – and has quietly been there **all along**. It helps you **COPE** – it helps you take that next step forward when you’re stuck – it helps you face another day. +++ +++ +++

And then, what happens? ((This is important...)) Then, what happens, while Elijah stands there staring at the silence with his cloak around his face?? +++ A “voice” asks him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” +++ The silence is broken... Snap back to reality... “What **AM I** doing here? +++ What’s next? How shall I reengage?” +++ +++ For Elijah, “next” was being sent back into the wilderness by the Lord – hundreds of miles to the Wilderness of Damascus to anoint a king. – His circumstances didn’t get any easier – they were still there – he still had work to do *in the wilderness* – but his experience on the mountain helped him **cope** with his demons.

Finding God in his own life again allowed Elijah to put one foot in front of the other and get on with his work.

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The possessed man in our gospel lesson is a *pitiful* example of Wilderness Living. In ancient times mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, was thought to be demon possession, and it makes sense to think that's at least part of what's happening here. Naked and tormented, he had taken up residence among the city's tombs – embracing *death* every moment of his *life*. ... After Jesus heals him, the man does not want to remain in the city where his past will continue to haunt him – with no friends or family – among people who are afraid of him now. He **begs** to stay with Jesus, to keep the presence of the Lord so clear and central to his life – but Christ sends him back to his own city, to wander the streets and tell his story over and over to people who already know it. But, it's a story he knows is true – of the peace the Lord brings to his life when he needs it most, giving him the strength to continue.

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The Psalmist knew all about our desperate search for God – our **need** to find God in our suffering. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my *soul longs* for you, O God. ²My soul **thirsts** for God, for the **living** God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God? ³My **tears** have been my food day and night... ⁷Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. ⁸By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life... ¹¹Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? **Hope** in God; for **I shall again praise him**, my help and my God.”

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I guess Wilderness Living is part of being fallen creatures in this imperfect world – where your Creator loves and respects you enough to let you walk your own paths – to carry your own burdens – to pick up your own cross and follow +++ even when it's a Wilderness Path. And, in your desperation – the GOOD NEWS is the Lord **will** show up **to walk the Wilderness Path with you!** Perhaps not in the dramatic places you first look, but the Lord will show up at least **in the sounds of sheer silence**, giving you peace to gather your cloak around your neck, admire the view for a moment, and take another step – peace of mind to cope, conscious of God's quiet, constant, loving presence in the silence – and knowing that if this Wilderness Living is the path laid before you for now – the path you must tread – **you do not tread it alone.**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.