

June 23rd: [cave]

As we mentioned during the announcements, we have begun a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. When in displacement, we might feel adrift or lost, or perhaps anxious and afraid, or maybe insecure or bitter. We might have lost sight of the people, places, or objects that make us feel safe and at home, so we feel a deep sense of vulnerability. This month, we’re focusing on stories of involuntary displacement—so examples from our biblical story where displacement and disorientation is outside of human control.

So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

Let’s pray together.

God our Guardian, we find ourselves in this place because we are in need of your comfort—we are buffeted by life’s storms, we grow weary because of the world’s rejection, and we are exhausted by the constant disorientation that we feel. We come to you now, ready to receive your care and compassion, so we open ourselves to your presence and prepare our hearts for transformation. Speak to us anew this morning, bring peace to our souls. Amen.

There was a time in my life, not so long ago, when I found myself in a state of despair. I've shared about it before, but in the context of today's scripture passage, I wanted to give you a few more details.

I was an interim staff member at a large church in the Chicago suburbs, and when this congregation decided to turn my role into a permanent position, I was invited to apply. After several rounds of interviews, and great conversations about how much I loved my job and the church community, I was told that I was one of two final candidates. I started making plans for the following season, I started looking at new apartments closer to the suburbs so that my commute would be lessened, and I dreamed about paying off my student loans with a full time salary. However, just a few weeks later, I was led into a room of leaders, and told that they had selected the other candidate—the younger, less experienced, 1000 miles away candidate. I had a week to pack up my office and say my goodbyes before my successor arrived, and on my last day, I called one of my close friends and I sobbed on her front steps.

After leaving that job, I wandered the streets of Chicago for hours each day, feeling lost and confused. I walked laps around my neighborhood, wore out my shoes, cried all my tears, and prayed all the angry prayers. It was not only my income that I had lost, it was my sense of self—my vocational identity, my confidence in what I had to offer, my belief that I was called to this position in the first place. I lost my sense of purpose, the reason I got out of bed every morning. It deeply unsettled me, because if I was no longer a pastor, and I had no church to call my home, what was I supposed to do? Someone else now had my job, someone else now loved my congregation, someone else worked in my office—so who was I supposed to be?

I can share all of this now because I am in a mentally stronger place, and those wounds have healed into visible and not so visible scars. From this vantage point of several years in the future, I can understand that this wasn't not the end for me, and it wasn't the end for my ministry. I might not have been able to see it then, but I can see that now. And I'm even thankful that things worked out the way they did, because I am who I am today because of this experience:

I am braver, and bolder, and more compassionate because I know what it is like to experience this displacement of self. I can more clearly articulate God's good news because I have gone through a season of despair, and I know that there is goodness waiting on the other side.

But it has taken time to get here.

And as I thought about our passage for today, I wondered if some of you might have experienced a similar situation, but are perhaps still in the middle of it. I wondered if we could spend some time with this story, and see how it might speak to us.

Our passage this morning comes from the life of a man named Elijah. Elijah is one of the great prophets of our Old Testament, and he served God's people under a time of great confusion and disruption. And unfortunately, we'll see that this confusion and disruption extends to Elijah's own life.

Our setting is the 9th century BCE, and at this point in our spiritual history, God's people have split into two nations: the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah. In the northern kingdom, King Ahab has taken the throne, and along with his bride Jezebel, he is committed to erasing the worship of God from the social and political landscape. He tears down altars dedicated to God, kills prophets and priests, and brings in new idols for the people to worship. During his reign, Ahab popularized the worship of other gods, specifically the god Baal from the Canaanite religion. Baal was known as a weather god—responsible for rain, lightning, wind, and agricultural fertility—so when the land of Israel experiences a major drought and famine, the whole nation is thrown into turmoil.

By the time we reach 1 Kings 19, Elijah is one of the only prophets that has remained faithful to God, and he is thrust into a very difficult situation. In the previous chapter, he invites Ahab and the priests of Baal to a challenge on the top of Mount Carmel—a challenge between the two gods to see which one is the most powerful. After Baal and his priests are unable to light the sacrifice on

their altar, Elijah calls upon God, who sends down a lightning strike and engulfs his altar in flames. Although he has proven that Baal is an empty idol, Elijah is now in danger, as Ahab and Jezebel are threatening to kill him.

Verse 3 tells us that Elijah was deeply frightened by this threat, and so he flees Israel in an attempt to protect himself. When he reaches Judah, the southern kingdom, he decides to go into the wilderness to find a place to hide. So yes, there is physical displacement going on here, and that's an important aspect of our story but that's not what I want us to focus on this morning. Instead, I want us to consider that Elijah's physical displacement is just a symptom of his spiritual and professional displacement, which is profound and devastating. The physical distance that he must travel in order to keep himself safe, and the physical remoteness of this wilderness and cave are not the cause of his despair, but they amplify his feelings of disillusionment and discouragement.

Elijah has left his homeland, and he's on the run with nowhere safe to go. He's lost his position as a prophet, he can no longer speak to God's people on God's behalf because he's far away from the culture and community that he used to be a part of. And this is the only thing he has been trained to do—his whole life has revolved around this ministry—it has been his only purpose. With this role no longer part of his life, what is he supposed to do?

I think it's important for us to ask: how does Elijah deal with this displacement of purpose? How does he deal with this feeling of being separated from his source of identity? How does he deal with this isolation from the people that he has spent his career serving?

Well, like me, Elijah goes for a long walk. And the first place that he comes to is a broom bush, and he sits down to rest and pray. In his conversation with God, he reveals that his despair is so great that he has reached an almost fatal level of depression. His sense of displacement is so great that he wonders if it is even worth it to keep living. He says to God, "I have had enough, LORD... Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

This is a tough situation, for sure.

If you've ever experienced a similar depth of despair during a displacement of purpose, you know that sometimes it feels like the only way to escape the pain is to no longer be alive. Our brain might tell us that the weight of everything is just too heavy for us to bear, and giving up is the only way out. Our biggest impulse is to seek relief, and sometimes we might not care what that relief actually looks like. I get that.

If that's a thought process that has been a part of your story recently, or a feeling that you're having as you think about your current situation, I want to encourage you to come talk to me or Pastor Heather after the service—we want to make sure that you have the support in your life to help you find hope again. We can connect you with resources or recommend a professional to reach out to—we don't want you to go through this despair alone. I'm also going to put up on the screen behind me the number to the Suicide and Crisis Hotline—you can call or text that number 24/7 and speak to a real human who is willing to listen and help.

If you're not feeling that level of despair but you are in a season of displacement right now involving your own identity and purpose, or if you're feeling estranged from or uncertain of your own role and function in a certain community—there are two things that I want to share with you this morning. I hope that these two insights will help you navigate your life and whatever is in front of you.

First, I invite you to look for the nourishment that God is offering you right now.

In our biblical story, an angel provides Elijah with bread and water, and instructs him, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." That simple bread and water is the sustenance that fuels Elijah's next steps—it is that nourishment that gives him the hope, and the energy and the strength to make it to the cave where God will speak to him. And it's at this cave that God

renews Elijah—it's where Elijah connects with God in a real and tangible way. The cave is where God's voice and calling becomes clear.

But in your life, I want you to identify what this means for you, and where you cave might be. Take some time to reflect—what is giving you hope and strength and courage right now? In this season, what is it that is keeping you going? Is it a book that you're reading? Is it a relationship that is nurturing you? Is it a spiritual practice that anchors you to the divine? Is it a service opportunity where you can make an impact? Is it a cause that ignites your passion?

Find that nourishment and use it to fuel your own next steps. And use that nourishment to connect with God in a deep and profound way.

And second, I invite you to consider that this time of confusion and feeling unmoored is setting up for something new—something powerful—even if it looks different than you might expect.

In this same chapter, after our passage for this morning has concluded, we learn that Elijah's ministry isn't over; it just shifts from what he was used to. In these later verses, we hear that God has spoken to Elijah, and given him the information he needs to anoint his successor. When God speaks to Elijah, God tells him to go and seek out a man named Elisha, who Elijah will train and prepare to take over this important work. At the end of this narrative, we hear that Elisha accepts this new position, and begins to travel with Elijah as his servant, like an apprentice. Together they continue this work, and together they prepare for a new season in Israel's history.

And I think the same can be true for us—if we find ourselves in a transition of our own. Whether it's helping your children leave the nest, or changing careers, or shifting into an unfamiliar routine in retirement, the next season of your life might look different than the life that you're used to. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have tremendous value! It can be just as meaningful, just as impactful, and just as life-giving as your previous roles, titles, or responsibilities.

It might be that during this new phase of your life, God is leading you into a new role—the role of mentor, the role of supporting the next generation, the role of encouraging someone younger in need of wisdom. It could be a transition into taking on a new purpose, or a new opportunity to grow, or a new way to be a leader. You could have something incredibly valuable to offer to someone else, and God might be inviting you into that chance to share what you've learned, or how you've been transformed.

So as we wrap up our time of meditation—I encourage you to spend some time this week in your own metaphorical cave—a place where you can connect with God about what is going on in your own experiences of displacement. Find the fuel for your journey, and find the new purpose that God is calling you into.

Because my friends, displacement might try to tell us that life is over, but it's really just the beginning of something beautiful.

Amen.