



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 auburnpres@gmail.com

“Testing, Testing—Is Anyone There?”

I Kings 19:1-18; Mark 1:29-39

Well, I’ve done it again. This is my 8th day in a row of work. I have 5 more days before I get a day off. A few weeks ago, I worked 20 straight days without a day off. Impressive, huh? Doesn’t that make me a “dedicated servant of the Lord”? Doesn’t that bring forth your care, or at least your sympathy?!?

No, all that shows is that I am not being very smart about self-care. Of course, you don’t have to be a pastor to neglect yourself. A lot of men, especially, refuse to take time to recharge, or pay attention to their own health. Dr. T.E. Holt wrote about this in a recent magazine article called, “Why Men Are Babies”, based on his experience with patients during his training and in his practice. Lots of men avoid doctors, my father-in-law among them. Some say away because they have this “strong, silent male” image they feel they must live up to. They may be dying inside, but they are afraid to let that out. Other men are all too aware of how easily they are hurt by needles, or procedures, so they just don’t get shots, or check-ups. Holt tells of one story of a man who was brought in by his nagging daughter, after he had been losing weight all year, and large growths had appeared all over his body. He had told her, they aren’t painful, they aren’t important, and besides, I’ve got a farm to run. He was compliant with the tests and procedures Holt and his colleagues ran. In fact, “everyone [in the clinic] loved him. He was the ideal patient. ‘A hero,’ one of us said. And 4 months later he was dead.” [*Men’s Health*, July/August 2007, p. 112-114]

This man—and many men and not a few women who are strapped into care-giving roles—are either workaholics or stink at self-care out of misplaced convictions or life commandments installed in them by family or culture. And we have another case in Scripture today.

Open your Bibles with me to the book of First Kings, which is 9 books into your Bibles. In First Kings, find chapter 19, and we’ll read about one of the prophets God raised up in a very dark period of Israel’s history, when Ahab was king. He had married a dominating foreign wife named Jezebel, and Jezebel had brought her foreign gods with her and had been seeking—with Ahab’s full participation—to install the worship of her pagan gods throughout the country. In fact, chapter 19 here follows a big confrontation between Elijah, God’s prophet, and the prophets of this foreign god named Ba’al. It’s a great story in itself, but I’ll just summarize it to say, it was a great victory for God’s man over the prophets of Ba’al. And Elijah led a slaughter of those false prophets, to cleanse the land. Big victory, right? So now we begin with chapter 19. Listen for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. [*I Kings 19:1-18*]

Elijah was having a bad day, and Jezebel’s threat only explained a portion of his funk. Psychologist and researcher Arch Hart, one of my doctoral professors, has done a lot of research into the emotional difficulties of ministry, and written several books on stress and health. According to Arch, many ministers have what he calls, “Blue Mondays”. Monday for them is a letdown; they often can’t get started, or accomplish much, the whole day long, and climb into bed at the end of Monday feeling defeated. A big part of the explanation for this is that they

have put out so much energy and self-esteem on Saturday, and especially Sunday, that their bodies are simply shouting about a need for replenishment. Cortisol, a stress hormone, built up over the weekend and peaked on Sunday. After the evening service (which many churches still hold), their bodies seized on the scheduled letdown to weigh them down even further, so that they would have to recover.

It looks to me like Elijah was having a “Blue Monday” after the adrenaline rush of his contest with the prophets on Mt. Carmel. Sure, it had been a success, but he has having an adrenaline crash, and the threat from Jezebel just deepened the trough of depression and depletion he would have felt, anyway. He went off by himself—another typical male action. At least, he could pour out his heart to God. And God cared for him and sent him to meet with Him on Mt. Horeb.

There, God called to Elijah. First, God sent dramatic natural events—a mighty wind, an earthquake, and even a wildfire like we know so well in the West. But Elijah did not detect God in any of those; perhaps in his weakened state, those were just too much for him. *HE wasn't going to go out there into THAT.* So God accommodated Elijah, by coming as a still, small voice, and Elijah could respond to that, and come out to talk with God. It's almost as if God and Elijah were testing each other, like when a band, or a radio operator, tests their equipment. “Testing, Testing—Is Anybody There?”

Elijah repeats his complaints—it's kinda whiney, isn't it? “I'm all alone, the people don't listen to me, and the king and queen are out to kill me—after all I've done for You, O Lord!”

And what does God say? “Get real. Get going.” Elijah, because of his stress, has lost his ability to look beyond himself. His world has shrunk down to just “me, myself, and I”—oh, and God, too—in that order. God raises Elijah's eyes to the bigger picture of what God is doing. God represents reality for Elijah—“There are thousands who have not bowed their knee to worship this foreign god. They are mine,” says God. “And you are to recruit from them others who will help claim and cleanse my people.”

Elijah has fixated on this one snapshot of events. God raises his sight to see that this one snapshot is part of a whole movie of snapshots, and the movie is moving on.

Stress does these things—it leads to depression, to a narrowing of vision, to physical exhaustion. We've got the body chemistry data to prove it. We men (and women, too) need to practice good self-care. The Bible would call it, “good stewardship of the resources God has given you.” (Oh, by the way, I'm taking tomorrow morning off, and I'll be exercising and hitting golf balls—great ways to deal with stress. Don't expect me to answer the phone tomorrow morning. :-)

One more text today, this one from the New Testament, the gospel of Mark. Find chapter 1, verses 29-39 where we find Jesus at work. Listen again for God's Word to you and to me.
[text]

Jesus has just come off a sermon in the synagogue and casting out a demon from a man there. He goes immediately to Peter's house, where Peter's mother in law is ill. He heals this woman, and she makes food for Jesus and his followers. But the day is not over. Mark says, “. . . After sunset, the people brought ALL the sick and demon-possessed. . . The whole town gathered at the door.” It was a long night.

The next verse sees Jesus get up early—after all that!—and goes off by himself to connect with God. (Jesus probably spoke his prayers out loud, so he didn't want to disturb the others in the house.) The disciples get up later, realize Jesus isn't there, and go looking for him. "Hey, mom's got breakfast on, and everyone is looking for you" (to get healing, we would expect).

Jesus is quite a success! Crowds are beginning to build, the ministry is really taking off!

But what does Jesus say? He's been talking to his Dad. "Let's go on to other villages, so I can preach there, too," he says. He has a fresh perspective because he spent time with God. God's ministry for him is not about healing, it's about announcing the Kingdom of God, and healing is only a part of that. God represents reality to Jesus, giving him a new perspective on God's plan, lest he be seduced by success and just do healings from morning to night. Healings are not "the main thing". They are only "illustrations", or "examples" of the power of Kingdom Living. And so Jesus—probably to the consternation and puzzlement of his disciples—moves on, to get with God's plan.

God is showing and telling this morning—that we are to care for ourselves, as well as care for others. When God gives Adam and Eve the job of caring for the creation, it's an easy job. And the man and woman are part of that creation. They rest in the evening; they have a Sabbath, to rest with God in that creation. They are not above creation. Of course, our first parents decided they knew how to live their lives better than God did. They did NOT connect with God, like Elijah and like Jesus did. If only they had done that!

A key part of self-care is connecting with God. The picture of the original relationship between people and God is everyone spending the evening taking a walk together and hanging out. It's how God designed us: work, relationships, and rest.

"Testing, testing—is anyone there?" No, I'm talking about you. Are you getting this? How good are you at self care, honoring the way God made you, with work, relationships, and rest? How is your relationship with God, and how do you feed it?

In the cool of the day—before each day starts or after it ends—spend some time hanging out with God. Put yourself consciously with God. Ask God to come to you. Pay attention to all the ways God connects with us—dreams, emotions, memories, intuitions, imagination, "chance encounters", and especially through His Word. Listen, and ask God for more.

In First John, chapter 4, John tells us to "test the spirits, to see if they are of God". So how do we know what we seem to be getting is God "talking", and not just "me making it up", or "me, talking to myself", or "some other spirit trying to create mischief"?

Start by asking God! "Why do you want me to (say,) remember this thing that just popped into my head, Dad?" Ask that, and "tune in" again. Speak your prayers out loud, as Jesus did. Command any spirits to be silent—you have that authority. Ask God to make things really clear—"big, neon lights," as a friend of mine says. Apply the "snapshot or movie" test—is this something that came to you just once, or does God bring this thought or feeling or intuition again and again? Is this thought or feeling or intuition or memory in keeping with God's nature and God's values that we see acted out in His record? Is God's voice to you kind? (If it's punitive, it's not God's voice!) Try, test, talk, connect. Make this part of your self-care, as you work, enjoy relationships with God and others, and rest.

Ah! There is so much to enjoy in this life! Remember, the chief purpose of people, as the Shorter Catechism of our Presbyterians’ “Westminster Confession of Faith” has it, is to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Start enjoying God now, so that you won’t be out of practice when you meet Him in eternity—and so you won’t cheat yourself of what God wants to give you now, nor rebel against the way you were made. Good stewardship. Self-care. Recharging. *With God!*

Testing, testing—is anyone there? Go ahead—test God in this! But, “put your ears on!” Make the time to honor and enjoy God. Feel God’s pleasure, and not His absence. Let God’s energy flow—in, and through, YOU!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 23, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]