



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Life is Hard...But Grace Abounds

Luke 8:26-39 & 1 Kings 19:1-15a

A sermon by William M. Klein

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**1** As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. **2** My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Ps. 42:1-2 NRSV)

**1** Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. **2** Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." **3** Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. **4** 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." **5** Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." **6** 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. **7** 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." **8** 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. **9** At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" **10** He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." **11** He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; **12** and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. **13** When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" **14** He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." **15** Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus..." (1 Kings 19:1-15a NRSV)

**26** Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. **27** As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. **28** When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"? **29** for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) **30** Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. **31** They begged him not to

order them to go back into the abyss. **32** Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. **33** Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. **34** When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. **35** Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. **36** Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. **37** Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. **38** The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, **39** "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. (Lk. 8:26-39 NRSV)

Life can be hard...sometimes very hard...but do not forget that grace abounds.

This attitude is the common thread running through each of our three readings for this morning – first from Psalm 42 we recited as our Call to Worship...and then the two texts we just read from 1 Kings 19 and Luke 8.

1

**Psalm 42** begins with those memorable words – “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” You and I have known what it is to be thirsty. The psalmist, though, uses thirst as a metaphor. He describes his thirst for something other than water...and we have known that kind of thirst, too, haven't we?

We know that kind of thirst as the nagging feeling that something is missing...that there is something more to life. Peggy Lee, in the 1960s, sang, "Is that all there is... (because) if that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing..." Twenty years later the Irish group U2 sang, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." At some level music, art, poetry, literature all express this sentiment in some sense.

No matter how happy we may be, this thirst, this feeling that something is missing, never goes away. And lest you think this thirst is something to grumble about...our awareness of this thirst, this longing, means that at a level deeper than we may understand, we know we are incomplete. While we may experience this emptiness, this sense of incompleteness, as a painful burden...this hole inside of us is not some form of punishment. It is a "God-shaped-hole." Nothing else will fit...not friendship or a cold beer or an exercise plan or a chocolate bar or a diploma or a shopping spree or success. This hole in our heart and soul is the space from which we call to God. The very longing to fill the space comes from God. And just as a deer knows it needs water, we understand our true thirst when we realize the empty space in us is the space only God can fill.<sup>1</sup>

Have you or I ever longed for God in this way? Or to put it another way...have you or I ever been that aware that God is what we need?

2

The reading from the Hebrew Bible tells us the prophet **Elijah** was on the run. Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him because Elijah arranged for the killing of 500 prophets of her god Baal, the Canaanite god.<sup>2</sup> But Elijah was not just fleeing from Jezebel, was he? He

2

was fleeing from God... You see, God never told him to kill those prophets. God had asked Elijah to tell King Ahab that God was going to end the drought. God was going to send rain. God didn't tell the prophet to have the prophets of Baal killed.

So Elijah was on the run because he feared the queen's wrath and God's displeasure. He fled into the wilderness, found a solitary broom tree, lay down under the tree, and prayed he would die. An angel disturbed Elijah's melancholy and told him to eat and drink what the Lord had provided. And so he ate and drank as he was told...and it was enough to sustain him for 40 days and nights as he traveled to Mt. Horeb.

Finding a cave at Mount Horeb, Elijah went into it to sleep the night. The word of the Lord came to him there too, saying, "What are you doing here?" Elijah recounted that his intention was to serve God by punishing the wicked within Israel...and now everyone in Israel was seeking to kill him. God may as well kill him in that lonely cave than to let him die at the hands of Queen Jezebel's army.

God told the prophet to get on his feet...to go stand before the Lord at the mouth of the cave. A great wind passed by - but God was not in the wind. After the wind an earthquake - but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire - but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of absolute silence.

When Elijah realized what he was hearing, he realized God does not just appear in dramatic fashion - with ferocious winds or judgmental earthquakes or refining fires. There are times when God comes in a still, small, barely discernible whisper...a whisper we may well miss if we are expecting fireworks.<sup>3</sup> God's ways were to be Elijah's ways... and are to be our ways.

For Elijah following God was not easy. You and I don't find following such a God any easier. We want righteous indignation. We want God to punish those with whom we disagree. We want vengeance...and we want to be agents of that vengeance. **But** God's grace abounds...and that grace is not just for us.

3

**Luke** tells us that in a certain country (i.e., that of the Gerasenes) there was a man full of demons. A person full of demons was known as a demoniac. This demoniac was forced to live alone and naked among the graves. We are not told...but he must have been a menace...so he was forced to make his home among the tombs...a friendless place...a place he could be of no harm to himself or to anyone else...a place out of sight so others would not have to deal with him on a regular basis.

As hard as it is for us to identify with the demoniac...I think Luke means for us to try. So if we try perhaps we can identify with the profound pain that comes with loneliness and isolation...the pain inflicted when others run every time they see us coming...or perhaps what it is like to be "possessed" by an unhealthy obsession or addiction.

When this demon-possessed man saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me."

I find myself wondering...who was speaking here? The man or the demons in the man? Were the demons afraid Jesus would cast them out of their host and into the abyss -

as Jesus said he would do? If it was the man speaking, was he concerned the Lord of life would treat him as a pariah – just as everyone else did?

Or, another possibility... Was the man afraid to face who he truly was in God's eyes? When Jesus asked him his name he replied, "Legion" - which meant he was not one person but many, many. He was pulled in so many directions he did not know who he was. Was the man alarmed that Jesus knew who he really was...who he really was in God's eyes with all the evil notions and behavior peeled away? To be known in such a way can be very disturbing and confounding and frightening, can't it!

I'm afraid we discount this demoniac if we don't take the time to see something of ourselves in him. Not the demonic possession parts...though we may well have obsessions or additions that can certainly feel a lot like demon possession. No, I'm talking about the lengths to which we go to sidestep being known...to avoid having to come to terms with who and what we are. I'm talking about the gruff behavior or the hard-headed dogmatism employed to keep people at arm's length. I'm talking about the loneliness and isolation and the breakdown in community that results.

When Jesus threw every demon out of the man he could then become a part of the community again. He could return to his family. He could live a normal life.

Jesus' work was restoring community. His ministry was about forgiveness, forbearance, and reconciliation. He broke down dividing walls and established colonies of heaven on earth – fashioned a kingdom of people who loved God and neighbor more than self. Jesus was and is in the "community restoration" business...and we can assume that is what this exorcism story was all about. Free of chains and shackles, free of stigma and fear, he returned home to know and be known...and to proclaim the goodness of God.<sup>4</sup>

4

The psalmist, Elijah, and the demoniac...each knew life was hard. And each in his own way found that God's grace abounded.

You and I know this, as well, don't we? This awareness grounds us, helps us bear life's inevitable ups and downs, and helps us bear one another's burdens.

Life can be hard...sometimes very hard...but do not forget that grace abounds. That grace is working when we long for the living God the way a deer longs for flowing streams. Let us leave here today at least as aware of what we need as a deer. Amen.



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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Martin, James J. 2010. The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life. HarperCollins E-book, location 1106.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Kings 18 for the story of the contest on Mt. Carmel between God and Baal.

<sup>3</sup> Hollyday, Joyce. 2007. "One in Christ," from [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net) for Proper 7, Year C. *Sojourners* • 2401 15th Street NW • Washington DC 20009.

<sup>4</sup> Hollyday.