

STORING UP FAITH

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Kings 19:1-15a
Luke 8:22-25

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Here in Northeast Ohio, a shortage of water is not typically a concern. Now it's true that August has been a bit dry and our average rainfall is below average for this month, but the months of April, May June, and July all saw above average rainfall, so we are still more than 3 inches above normal. Most of the time here in Ohio, we have plenty of water, and sometimes we even have more water than we want. That fact is why we can look around this morning and enjoy this beautiful green outdoor setting. Of course, this is not the case everywhere. There are places in this world that are very dry. In fact, there are deserts where it may not rain for an entire year or more. Such places have harsh, life-compromising conditions where the days are blisteringly hot, and the bone-dry nights are cold. In such desert places, water is often the difference between life and death.

Most of us Ohioans wouldn't survive half a week in a desert without our sunscreen, air-conditioners, bottled water and eventually a ride home. The closest some of us have ever gotten to survival in the desert is poolside in Scottsdale, Arizona or Las Vegas, Nevada or one of the other desert cities. But there is a fascinating creature that not only survives but thrives in the desert. The Desert Tortoise of the Mojave Desert is a true desert survivor. Its physiology and behavior help it survive. For one thing, it sleeps a lot, basically from November through late March. The next thing it does is find nourishment in unlikely places, like shoveling up a mouthful of gravel and gleaning some of the mineral resources it needs from the gravel. And another thing that greatly helps the tortoise survive is its ability to store water.

Generally, it rains about once a year in the Mojave. So, from March to mid-May is about the only time the desert is alive with green plants to eat. It's during that time that the desert tortoise eats and eats and eats. It stores all the liquid from the plants in its body – nothing is evacuated. Eventually, the tortoise's bladder, which is like an internal canteen, grows until it is 30 percent of its body weight. The tortoise not only holds the liquid but is also able to reabsorb and recycle it. As you can imagine this ability to store and recycle water is extremely helpful. And that's not all, the tortoise can adjust such things as its body temperature, and its water and salt concentrations in ways that restore balance even in the harshest of conditions. These various abilities allow the Desert Tortoise of the Mojave to live happily in a region that few other creatures find hospitable.

In our scripture lesson today, we find the prophet Elijah in a desert. He is discouraged and scared. Elijah had just won a spectacular competition that had pitted himself and the Lord God on one team against the numerous prophets of Baal on the other team. The prophets of Baal lost big time, but now Elijah is on

the run. He might have won the competition, but he is a wanted man who is fleeing the hostility of others for the dangers of the desert.

The first thing Elijah does in the desert is to lie down under a broom tree for a much-needed nap. He needed to stop, slow down, and rest. Sleep deprivation can mess with the mind and alter one's reality. He did not sleep for five months like the tortoise, but Elijah does get some rest. Actually, that's not exactly the first thing he did, because first of all, Elijah spent some time complaining to God. He vented his anger, frustration, and fear – then out of exhaustion he fell asleep.

When we're facing the terrible trials and tribulations in the wilderness of our lives, when we're facing illness, loss of employment, family tragedy or any life-blistering experience or bone-chilling misfortune, honestly communicating with God is always a good thing to do. Whether we are happy or sad, chattering with excitement or shouting with anger, we need to be communicating with God. And then when we're done, we may be able to rest, relax and sleep in the arms of God's reassuring presence.

Well, after sleeping, Elijah starts the new day with some nourishment. He eats and drinks what God has provided. In fact, twice he sleeps, and twice he eats and drinks. The sleep and the miraculous bread and water provided by God are exactly what he needs to sustain him for his journey across the desert.

We know that the camel can survive about a week to several months without drinking water, the duration depending on the severity of conditions and whether succulent plants are available to eat. The Desert Tortoise can survive a year without drinking water. But we humans can only live about 3-5 days without water, and our spiritual survival and thriving in this life only happens when we avail ourselves of long, regular drinks at the fountain of faith.

It has been amidst tragic, stress-filled situations that I have often heard people say, "I couldn't have gotten through this without my faith. I just don't know how people do it without faith." If faith is what we need to survive in a harsh world, how do we get enough of that sustaining faith? Where do we get it? How do we store it? We may not have the same wonder-water and hot cakes to eat like Elijah before our long and trying journeys in this life, but we do have the living water of life from which to drink. Jesus declared, ***"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).***

This Living Water flows from our Lord. Christ is the sustaining water that empowers us to face all of life's circumstances – even if that means 40 days or more in what very much seems like a desert wilderness. But what we need to do is sip daily from this water supply that Christ makes available to us. We drink from this water not just because we need it today, but because we might desperately need it tomorrow. The Desert Tortoise doesn't store water for today alone; he stores water for all his desert days ahead. When it comes to living water, we store it for the bitter and blistering times to come when having stored up faith might mean the difference between despair and fortitude – hopelessness and hope.

When the disciples got in a boat with Jesus one day to travel to the other side of the lake, they had no idea that the trip would be anything but calm and easy. But partway across the lake, a terrible windstorm swept down on the lake. The waves became larger and larger, and the boat began to rock from side to side. Soon, the boat began to fill with water, and the disciples knew that they were in danger. Did they dip into their storehouse of faith to handle the situation with calm assurance? Nope, they panicked. So even though they knew that Jesus was exhausted, they woke him up from what must have been a very sound sleep. Jesus, of course, took care of the situation by calming the storm. But then he turned to his disciples and said, **"Where is your faith?"** (Luke 8:25). That is a powerful and convicting question: **"Where is your faith?"**

Do you have a heart, mind, and soul full of faith for the times when you need it most? During the terrible days of the Blitz during World War II, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a large shell hole. Seeking shelter as soon as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy cried out, "I can't see you!" The father, looking up against the sky tinted red from the burning buildings, called out to his son, "But I can see you. Jump!" The boy jumped, because he had lots of stored up faith in his father.

And yet, even with faith, the trials and tribulation that Elijah faced were difficult. The combination of physical rest and sustenance, as well as his reserve of spiritual resources helped Elijah to face and persevere through a frightening ordeal and a very hostile environment, but it wasn't easy and he did not always have a positive attitude. But that's okay, because Elijah responded in faith to God and he went on that 40-day hike into the desert. Eventually, he reached a mountain. He was exhausted and he still wasn't happy about how his life as a man of faith, as a prophet, had turned out, and so he stubbornly hid in a cave and he once again complained to God. He basically said, "Life stinks, Lord, just leave me alone in this cave." But God has other plans for Elijah. At this point in Elijah's life, it is not wind, or an earthquake or fire that gets him out of that cave. I wonder if all those things were just too much like how he was already feeling inside. But God knew what he needed, and it was silence that got him out of the cave.

When our lives are filled with thunderstorms and earthquakes, and we find ourselves wandering in a scary wilderness of life, what we often want most is for God's reassuring presence to come to us in the silence. God reassures Elijah by saying, "Yes, your life is hard, but I am with you. And the thing is, I need you to keep doing my work; others need to see and experience my strength and wisdom and purpose through you, so you need to get out of that cave and keep going!"

Sometimes, we humans feel alone and afraid. Even people of faith feel like hiding away in a dark cave on the farthest edge of an emotional wilderness because we are tired and perhaps we have convinced ourselves that God has abandoned us. But who are we amidst today's unwanted life experiences to abandon hope and presume the future is just more of the same? When Elijah stomped off on his 40-day hike, he didn't know that God would ask him to anoint

a new king. Certainly, the Desert Tortoise has no idea what the future holds either, because in general, tortoises don't really think about the future. And yet, because of what the tortoise has stored up inside, it is able to continue and persevere in the most adverse conditions imaginable.

What do you have stored within you to help you persevere? None of us knows what the future holds, but those of us with stored up faith will have what it takes to survive the treacherous and even tragic terrain of earthly life. So, what we need to be doing is coming to Christ through worship, praise, prayer and Christian fellowship; we need to dive deeply into God's Word and engage in acts of loving care and service. We must drink deeply and often from the source of our faith if we are to be strong in faith and fulfill God's purpose for us.

I want you to think about the most significant faith-growing activities/practices/disciplines that personally help you grow in faith. Write on the blue water drop a couple of the most impactful activities for you and then glue your drop to our desert scene. If you prefer not to get up and down from your seat, just pass your drop to someone else. It's completely fine if a couple of individuals from each table glue all the drops from their table. Afterwards, please make your way back to your seat, so we can conclude today's service. In the next few moments, let us fill this wilderness desert with living water!

MUSIC: "As the Deer"

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we have come to you during worship this day as those thirsty and in need of water – not just any water, but Living Water, the kind of water that comes from you and fills us with faith and satisfies our souls. As those who believe in you and who desire to follow you, give each one of us a strong desire to walk in faith and to fulfill your purpose. Daily, may our lives honor you by the ways in which your living water flows from our hearts. Amen.