

**SOUL RESET:
Eat Something**

I Kings 19:1-11

To reset your soul, take care of your body.

A sermon preached by
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I have been blessed in my life with several mountaintop experiences. Some of these have been personal, like my children being born or getting married. Some mountaintops have been more pastoral or professional. I was ordained into the ministry in 1985; it was a mountaintop when hands were laid on me and authority was given to me to preach the Word and order the church. In 2003, I was on a big team of teachers at a national youth event called Youth 2003. It was a mountaintop experience to be with about 9,000 United Methodist youth from all over the world and to get to share a Bible study with some of them. I have had mountaintop experiences whenever I have been on a mission trip or on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I feel blessed to have had so many mountaintops.

Of course, I have had my valleys, too—deaths of my parents, a divorce, conflicts in the churches I've served. There have been some down times, too. Most of my life has been neither a mountaintop nor a valley. Most of life is lived somewhere on the side of the hill, between the mountain peaks and the depths of the valley below. It is enough most of the time to remember the peaks with fondness and to be thankful we survived the valleys.

We find Elijah in our Scripture text today following the greatest victory of his life, but it is a mountaintop that has drained his body and soul. Elijah needs a rest. Elijah needed a reset (which is almost the same word).

Elijah was a first of the great prophets, and his story is a wild one. He came along at a time when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had split, and Ahab was the king of the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab had married a foreign woman named Jezebel, and Queen Jezebel had introduced the worship of foreign gods, particularly the god Ba'al, into Israelite religion.

Elijah was so mad, he called on God to close the heavens, and there was a drought for three and a half years. Of course, the drought caused a famine. Suffering was widespread. Finally, Elijah challenged Ahab to bring the prophets of Ba'al to Mount Carmel for a contest. They were going to prove who was really God. Four hundred and fifty of the prophets of Ba'al showed up on the mountain. Elijah challenged them to a sacrifice contest. They were to build a sacrificial altar and call on Ba'al to light the fire. They built the altar, but no fire came from heaven.

Elijah not only built the altar, but had it doused with water three times. But when he called on God to light the fire, fire fell from heaven and burned up the sacrificial animal, the wood, the rocks and all the water. It was a great victory on the mountaintop for Elijah. It was a very bad day for Jezebel's prophets of Ba'al; Elijah killed them all. Shortly after that, the rain came and the drought was over.

But Elijah's trouble was not over. Jezebel vowed that Elijah would be like one of her dead prophets within 24 hours. So Elijah fled to the south, down into the desert, and he finally came to rest under the scant shade of a broom tree. There he was in

despair and asked the Lord just to let him die: *“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”*¹ Elijah fell asleep, and after a while, he was awakened by an angel with bread and water. He ate and slept some more and woke up and ate some more, and then he walked in the strength of that supernatural food for forty days until he came to the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, where Moses had experienced God on the mountaintop. Elijah sheltered in a cave on the mountain of God, and God’s voice spoke to him, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”*²

And Elijah answered God: *“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.”*³ He was not thinking of the huge victory he had just won, but of the defeats he had suffered. He was focusing not on his success, but on his failure. When you’re over-tired, you don’t think straight.

So the Lord God took Elijah out on the mountain. Suddenly a huge wind roared by, splitting rocks with its force. But God wasn’t in the wind. Then an earthquake shook the mountain, and a fire roared across the mountainside. But God was not in the earthquake or the fire, either. Then there was the sound of sheer silence. Some translations call it a still small voice. But it was the voice of God, repeating the question: *“Why are you here, Elijah?”* After giving Elijah instructions on what to do next, God sent him home. Elijah had encountered God on his little Jezebel-induced vacation, and he left the mountaintop, renewed, revived, and strengthened for his mission.

Sometimes our success can wear us out. We can do quite well, and give it all we’ve got, but it still leaves us exhausted, depleted, depressed, and in despair, even for our lives. We don’t handle success well. We neglect to take care of ourselves, and we find that it’s very easy to tumble from the mountaintop all the way down into the valley. If we let ourselves get overly fatigued, tired, or worn out, we feel a sense of doom and pessimism about the future. We can’t think creatively or lead effectively. We have a hard time seeing the big picture of our lives; there’s a great forest on the horizon, but all we see is the tree in front of us. And worst of all, we can’t hear the voice of God because there is so much noise going on in our head. We can’t hear the still, small voice in our heart. We need a reset of our soul.

When we look for a reset of the soul, we have to be sure to include our physical bodies in the reset. We have to take care of our physical life as well as our spiritual life. The Biblical view of human life is a unity of body and spirit. God made us whole beings. There is a strain of Christian thought going back to the early centuries of the church that was influenced by Greek dualism. In this strain of thought, the spirit is the good part, and the flesh is evil. Sometimes you hear echoes of this in Paul’s letters. But the bulk of the Bible talks about the goodness of all creation. The

physical world and our physical bodies are good creations of God, and we have to take care of ourselves if we are going to be whole and healthy. If we want to reset our soul, we have to take care of our body. So what does wholistic self-care look like?

This is very practical stuff. We take care of ourselves by getting enough rest. Human bodies need eight hours of rest. That is still the advice of health professionals after all these years. I don't do that most of the time. But when I am able to get a full night's sleep, I feel so much better. Rest also involves time off work, if you're still working. Even God rested on the seventh day. We can't go at it every day and expect to be healthy.

Taking care of our bodies involves eating well, too. We have to have a balanced, healthy diet to give our bodies good fuel to work on. The less processed food you can eat, the better you will feel. The less sugar and fats you eat, the better it is for you. There are so many diet plans on the market and published in books and online. You can find a healthy way to eat without too much trouble. The trouble comes with sticking to a healthy diet over a long period of time.

The third part of taking care of your body is activity. Each person has different abilities to be active physically. For some it is very limited what you can do. But we should strive to be as active as our bodies will allow us to be. If that means a good walk daily, that's fine. If it means running marathons, you go for it; I'll cheer for you! Everybody has their own favorites; I like hiking, biking, and playing golf. But anything you do that gets your heart pumping and your muscles moving is good stuff. Just do it!

If you put all these activities together—rest, diet, and exercise—you come close to the concept of Sabbath. Of course, Sabbath has a spiritual component as well. Sabbath is a day of worship. But taking care of our bodies is also an act of worship, because we are being good stewards of one of the good creations of God. Albert Schweitzer, the missionary, physician, and theologian, said, "If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan."⁴ If we are to experience wholeness and peace—what the Hebrews call *shalom*—we need a Sabbath rest. That is what Jesus promised in the key verse underlying this whole concept of "Soul Reset": "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*"⁵ Sabbath rest gives us a reset for our souls.

Sabbath rest gives us a chance for some self-reflection and self-inspection. We can take stock of our lives and see what we need to celebrate, as well as what we need to improve. I think this was behind God's question to Elijah on the mountain: "What are you doing here?" It wasn't just a statement of surprise. I think God was asking, "What has brought you to this place? And what is your purpose moving forward?"

With a little rest and a little time to reflect, we can ask the same questions of ourselves. What has led us here? What is our place and purpose in the grand scheme of things? What is our mission moving forward?

Doing some self-inspection, we can use our Sabbath time to clarify the important things in our lives. We can think about our mission in life; are we doing what God is calling us to do? We can assess our goals; are we making progress toward the things we want to accomplish? Are those goals still what we need to accomplish at all? We can reclaim the vision that once called us into action. Is it still the appropriate vision? Does it still call us forward? These clarifying thoughts do not come if we are always busy, always stressed and tired, never taking a moment to step back and look at our lives.

Stephen Covey, in his classic work *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* had as a last habit “Sharpening the Saw.”⁶ He compared life to cutting down a tree with a saw. After you’ve cut down so many trees, your saw gets dull. But it takes time away from cutting down trees to sharpen your saw. Some people will go on cutting down trees with a dull saw, expending more and more energy for less and less effect. Effective people will take time away from the main job of cutting down trees to do the maintenance on their saw. And when they return to work, they can cut down more trees with less effort.

We have many people who are trying to cut down trees with dull saws today. I have done that. It’s exhausting. It’s so much better to take time away. Get some rest. Eat some good food. Get some exercise. Release those endorphins. Reflect on the deep parts of your life. It’s like sharpening your saw.

What’s your still small voice saying today? Can you hear God speaking? It may not sound like a mighty wind or an earthquake or a fire. It may be very quiet, very simple, sort of like a divine suggestion. Listen. Pay attention. Follow his instructions. And you will get your soul reset.

We are living in such an incredible and unprecedented crisis time right now. It may seem difficult or even foolish to talk about Sabbath. Who has time for that now? But I found a passage from a book about the last time we had a national sabbath, the last time the weight of events literally drove us to our knees to get ourselves right. A. J. Swoboda wrote about it in his book *The Dusty Ones*:

There has been one day in our society when we have Sabbath, when we have truly rested. There has been one day when we've put off our jobs, gone home, and just been—September 11, 2001.

On that day, all of us who could went home. We stopped flying. We left our work. Our whole society rested. We called people we were at odds with and reconciled. Imagine what it would be like if we rested for something good: because we are reconciled people. It is like the famous *Yam HaShoa* festival in

the nation of Israel. For one day each year in Israel, the entire nation stops what they are doing to remember the Holocaust and its victims. Cars stop driving, people stop working, gas stations stop pumping gas. Everything stops.

In a weird way, it required a tragedy to cause us to rest. A horrible tragedy. But that tragedy caused us all to go home and tell people we love them, to stop working, and to just be for a day. Like September 11, Holy Saturday was rest that was brought about by tragedy. And we rest because of Holy Saturday. The Jewish rabbis said that if everyone rested on Sabbath, the Messiah would come back. The Christian story twists that. For in the Christian story, when the Messiah comes back, everyone can rest from their toil. We no longer have to strive to become something before God and can, for once, rest in his love.⁷

Our spiritual practice for this week of Soul Reset is “Taking Care of Your Body.” Try these practices this week and see if it doesn’t lead you closer to Sabbath time even in the midst of the crazy times we are experiencing.

Day 1: Sleep eight hours. Make a plan to get eight hours of sleep each night this week. Notice how much better your body functions with adequate rest.

Day 2: Drink plenty of water. Try to drink eight full glasses of water (non-caffeinated) during the day. Reflect on Jesus as the Living Water of your soul. (John 4)

Day 3: Go for a long walk if you are physically able, soaking up the sun and fresh air. Take deep breaths. As you inhale, breathe in the grace of God; as you exhale, breathe out praise to God.

Day 4: Fast from sugar. Avoid this highly addictive substance as much as possible. At the end of the day, think about what forms of sugar you could permanently eliminate to take better care of your body.

Day 5: Write a letter to your body, thanking your body for all it does for you. Or write a prayer to God, thanking God for how you have been wonderfully created with an amazing body. Consider how you might take better care of yourself as an act of worship to your Creator.

Day 6: Find an exercise buddy, an accountability partner who will help you keep on track with physical activity to take care of your body.

Day 7: Cook a good healthy meal. Enjoy it around the table with a few of your favorite people. Fuel your body with healthy food, and fuel your spirit with intentional time with loved ones. Pray a blessing over your meal and over your family or friends.⁸

Right now, in the middle of this crisis, under the threat of the coronavirus, we need Sabbath. We need it like we have never needed it before. May God so bless your life with Sabbath rest this week.

¹ I Kings 19:4.

² I Kings 19:9.

³ I Kings 19:10.

⁴ Nancy Gibbs, "And on the Seventh Day We Rested?" *Time* magazine (8-2-04).

⁵ Matthew 11:28f.

⁶ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 287ff.

⁷ A.J. Swoboda, *The Dusty Ones* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 142-143.

⁸ Junius B. Dotson, *Soul Reset: Breakdown, Breakthrough, and the Journey To Wholeness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 118ff.