

When Change-Makers Hit the Wall

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Date: 18 August 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Before we get into that, just as a warning, I'm going to ask you to do some things during the course of this sermon, some of which will involve writing or drawing or potentially! taking some notes. So if you want to, you're very welcome to come and grab a marker and a piece of paper from the front here. Or you cannot and do it all on your phone. That's fine, too. No judgment. As folks are coming to get paper, I just want to acknowledge, as several folks have. But this week sucked. This week has been rough. I don't know how many of you were sort of dreading that press. I was literally in a staff meeting watching the news updates on my phone for the announcement on Monday morning that our city's been federalized.

There's hundreds of federal agents coming to the city. Then we found out last night West Virginia, Ohio, and there's a third to Oklahoma, I think, sending more National Guard troops because that's what we need. And then there's videos of violent arrests. There's videos of homeless people's property and their literal place of dwelling being thrown into the back of garbage trucks. We've seen military checkpoints on U Street. We've seen federal officials wandering around asking people for proof of residency. Metro PD is cooperating with ICE. To be blunt, as an immigrant in this city, I'm kind of worried about what happens if one of these bored, jackbooted feds decides that I warrant a little bit of closer inspection. But that fear is nothing compared to my terror at the thought of my Venezuelan brown-skinned wife getting caught up in ICE crosshairs.

And as our WhatsApp group for the table, as some of the folks have been sharing, we're looking for a way to respond. We want to defend the vulnerable in our city. We want to address this increasing threat of authoritarianism. And I think that's good and normal, and I want to affirm that.

I think it's easy to underplay or downplay what's happening here. So I just want to acknowledge, before we get deep into the sermon today, if you're looking for ways to get involved, I thoroughly recommend getting in touch with Free DC, Harriet's Wildest Dreams, Black Lives Matter DC, the Washington Interfaith Network, our own table justice and compassion group, the DC peace team, DC mutual aid. There's so many groups that are doing great work, and I'd be happy to talk more about some of them afterwards if you want, or speak to anyone from our justice and compassion team.

But having said all that, I think even at a time like this, it's important that we're attentive to our own spiritual growth and formation. So as much as I've wrestled this week with giving a sermon on, let's talk about spiritual formation and growth, and how do we build our spiritual muscles in the midst of all this chaos. I've been thinking a lot about the church in Acts, which was always under threat from state violence, right? The Romans hated the church in Acts. The Jews hated the church in Acts. There were so many groups that were going after this church, and they were under threat from state-sponsored violence. But yet they came together almost daily, prayed, broke bread, and dedicated themselves to studying the Word of God. So I think it's important today that we acknowledge the real threats that are around us. We're clear-eyed about the need to fight for vulnerable people in this city, and also recognize that we need to devote ourselves to building our own spiritual muscles, and take this time to develop our relationship with our Creator.

[3 : 37] And I think our passage today does have some parallels. I think there's a danger of trying to crowbar too many parallels into a passage. But I think there is something in the passage we're going to look at today that gives us some insights into how we follow Jesus and how we build our own spiritual muscles in a time like this. So today we're going to look at 1 Kings, or 1 Kings chapter 19, beginning at verse 1. I think it will appear on the screen. I'm standing at the wrong angle, so I can't see. There we go. All right. So beginning at verse 1.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all of the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, may the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like one of theirs. Elijah was afraid, and he ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. I've had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, get up, eat. He looked around and he saw there by his head was some bread baked on hot coals, a jar of water. He ate and drank, and then he lay back down again. Then the angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him again and said, get up, eat, for the journey ahead is too much for you. So he got up, he ate and drank, and strengthened by that food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, and he said, what are you doing here, Elijah? And Elijah replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too. And the Lord said, go stand outside on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there came an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And then after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went and stood at the mouth of the cave. And the voice of the Lord said, what are you doing here, Elijah? And he replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too. And the Lord said to him, go back the way you came and go to the desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Haziel as king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel. And anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat from Abel Mola, to succeed you as prophet.

So before we get too deep into what happened in that passage, I want to give us two seconds of context for sort of how we got here. So firstly, we're in the period of Israel's history between the heydays of King David, where Pastor Anthony left us last week with the story of David and Goliath, and before the exile, where the temple of Israel was destroyed and a lot of the Israelites were taken off into captivity. So the people of Israel were supposedly God's people, having been blessed with this land and these traditions instilled through Moses. But the people of Israel had been pretty terrible at living up to those ideals. And in this episode, a particularly bad king had ascended the throne and led God's people astray. I'm sure many of us cannot even begin to imagine what a leader leading their people astray might look like. And this king had encouraged the people to engage in the worship of Baal, which was a clear violation of the first commandment that God had given to Moses. And as the passage mentioned, this leader's sin had included the targeted extermination of the prophets of Yahweh.

[8 : 01] So Elijah was one of the few people who remained in Israel who were faithful to Yahweh. And in the previous chapter, he'd had this sort of last stand victory where he'd conclusively proved before the people of Israel that Yahweh was mightier than Baal, which unsurprisingly really upset the people in power. And so thus we find ourselves in verse 1, where Jezebel, who's the wife of the current king and a disciple of Baal, threatens Elijah with this painful and very public death. And there's probably a whole sermon here that we could preach on Jezebel. She's not just this picture of evil and seduction that we're often presented with. But today we're going to judge her on her murderous threats against the man who murdered her friends. So in this context, Elijah quite literally runs for the hills.

Maybe Jezebel's threats had gotten to him. Maybe he was exhausted from the fight. Or maybe he was just sick of seeing injustice and violence at every turn and feeling less and less able to fight for what seemed like a hopeless cause. Now, I'm going to do something that the American Psychiatric Association does not allow you to do, but I'm going to do it anyway. For some bizarre reason, they have qualms with people making clinical diagnoses across thousands of years of history. But I'm going to say that Elijah was suffering from what we would classify today as the clinical condition of burnout.

This includes, and I think there's a slide that shows these, there's feelings of depletion and exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativity or cynicism related to one's job or one's work, and reduced professional and personal efficiency. Do we see that in Elijah?

It seems like a reasonable justification. Elijah was done. He was burned out and he was isolating himself from his people. You notice how he left his servant in verse 4 and then carried on by himself.

And God saw this. God knew this. God sent an angel, a messenger, or a helper to him in the desert. My personal interpretation of this, you're free to have your own, is that this wasn't actually an angel, the sort of angel that we see who appeared to marry all the shepherds. This was a human being.

[10 : 12] This was a human being sent by God to provide crisis care to Elijah. This person, an angel, helper, whoever they were, doesn't try to comfort Elijah. This person doesn't come in and try to help. They give him food. They give him water. They make sure he's still alive. And then they leave.

And so this is the first place where we might pause for a second. And I want you to reflect for a minute. Of the two people that we've discussed so far, and I realize they're sort of two extremes, the burned out Elijah sat under the bush, or the angel, the helper, sent by God to minister to others, who do you most identify with right now? Are you feeling ready for action, energized, and called to serve? Or are you done and exhausted and hoping someone else will help carry the weight? These roles aren't static, right? This isn't, will fluctuate between the two.

How you feel today may not be how you'll feel in a week or a month's time. But I think as we come to the conclusion of this series on what lies beneath, I think the first step for understanding how we grow in our faith, how we spiritually form ourselves in community, is we've got to understand how we're feeling. We've got to understand how we're doing emotionally and spiritually. For us to know what we need for spiritual formation, we've got to be honest. If we try to provide care to others when we're burnt out and exhausted, we're going to do harm. And if we keep sitting in a place where we're ready to receive care, when actually we need to be going out and doing something, we're failing to take our place in the fight for justice. So let's take one minute on the piece of paper that you may have grabbed, or on your phone, or in your mind, if that's easier for you. Draw a line, either horizontally, vertically, however you want to do it. Put Elijah burned out, exhausted under a broom tree at one end, and this angel helper, person sent by God to rescue Elijah, at the other. And then I want you to take just a little bit of time to reflect on where on that continuum you find yourself today. You don't have to share this with anyone. This doesn't have to be some sort of public display of how you're doing.

But just put a little mark where on that continuum you find yourself. This is just how you're doing spiritually and emotionally. So I'll give you a couple of seconds to draw that line, to think about where you are, and then we'll move forward. As we seek to do the work that sort of lies beneath, right? That's been the underpinning of this sermon series, that a lot of what we only see 10%, right? 90% of what happens in our lives is below the surface. I want to sort of pose my big question for the day, and this is inspired by Reverend Miriam Samuelson Roberts, who wrote one of the devotions in the Deconstructionist Playbook. And she asks this question, what does your healed self look like?

And I want to reframe that slightly to include spiritual formation. So I want to ask us today, as we go through the rest of this sermon, to think about what does your healed and spiritually formed self look like? Or if it's easier to imagine, what are the next steps for you on your journey of spiritual formation? Where do you need to heal or grow? And of course, healing can mean many things to many people. We had a whole sermon series not that long ago about how ableism can influence our own and others' understandings of what a healed body or mind looks like. But I want to think today specifically about what does it mean for our spiritual formation? What for us does a spiritually formed, spiritually healed, spiritually whole version of ourselves look like? So I'm going to ask you to think about that in a minute. But before I do that, I want to share a couple of the things that I've been thinking about as I try to picture what this sort of spiritually formed version of Matt looks like.

[14 : 06] And so for me, one of the first ones that comes to mind is being more comfortable in a mystical space, being more comfortable with the existence and the work of the Holy Spirit, the unseen, the unexplained, not just sort of the physical embodied faith that we all experience. And then a second one, I think linked but different, you can sort of see where my brain's been at this week, is to be a little more in tune of what God might be asking of me to do. If God speaks, am I listening?

Am I ready to receive it? Or am I just going to brush it off for something else? And I really want to get to a place where I'm thinking about people's spiritual needs. I recoil when people talk about things like, oh, the spiritual mess of our civilization. And like, some of that is just sort of right-wing propaganda, right? Like there's spiritual decay. And if everyone went back to church, everything would be fixed. But on the other side of that, there is something true about people aren't just physical and emotional beings. We're also spiritual beings.

And if we're caring for our community and helping our community, we need to be in touch with people's spiritual needs as well. So I've been thinking about this all week, and that's about as far as I've gotten with this question. So I'm now going to give you three minutes to come up with your own answer to that question. Yeah, just take a few minutes, write. If it's more comfortable, draw, right? Like maybe sometimes words aren't necessarily how we want to express it. But what does your spiritually healed, spiritually formed self look like? What do you imagine a spiritually formed version of yourself looks like? Write, draw, imagine, reflect. No one's going to claim your piece of paper afterwards and ask you to explain it. I think Paul's very kindly agreed to play a few bars on the guitar so it's not an awkward silence. And then I'll call you back in a couple of minutes as you think through this. Thanks, Paul. So part of the reason why I wanted you to write this down and not just think about it is that that two to three minutes is not enough to get an answer for what your spiritually formed self may look like. But if you have some written record of it, you can take it with you and think about it over the course of the week. And I encourage you to do that. I think one of the challenges of sermon series like this is that we can stand up here and say you should think about this and then we'll leave and go home and we don't. So I encourage you to keep wrestling with these questions. They're hard. But I think it helps us to know kind of what are we trying to build towards. I also want to give us a little bit of a roadmap, again, from the passage that we talked about today to think about how we can get to that vision of our spiritually formed self.

So firstly, the most important thing or the most important starting point for spiritual formation and spiritual healing is to have our basic physical needs met. When Elijah was in the desert under a tree saying, God, I'm ready to die. I don't want to do this anymore. God didn't say, come, Elijah, let's reflect on the future. He didn't say, come, Elijah, let us walk together and discuss all of the ways that you are not ready to die yet. He said, hey, Elijah, here's some food, here's something to drink, get some sleep. God doesn't even try to show up and help until after Elijah puts himself literally and spiritually in a place where he's ready to hear from God. I don't think these are separate or linear. I don't think there's sort of a you have to eat first and then spiritual formation comes. But if you've ever been hangry or sleep deprived, you'll understand why I think our physical condition can have some impact on our spiritual formation. So first step is make sure that you are physically in a good place. And that's going to look different for everyone, but making sure that our basic physical needs are met. And the second thing, and I think it's really easy to miss in this passage because it's just a couple of lines, but after receiving this care from the angel, the helper,

Elijah embarked on a 40-day journey of pilgrimage to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai. As a sort of an aside, I think it's kind of interesting that when God says, I need to spend some time with you, Elijah, he doesn't call Elijah to the temple in Jerusalem, which was still there.

[18 : 28] The temple had not yet been destroyed, but instead he says, let's go back to the place where this started. Let's go back to Mount Sinai. Let's go back to where Moses and God first interacted. So, Elijah takes this pilgrimage. And I don't think as a faith community, and I include myself in this, we have a great concept of what a pilgrimage is. So as much as I would love to talk to you about pilgrimage today, I'm not going to. But I'm going to talk about a sort of related idea. And I think this one might be more applicable to us. And that's the idea of a sabbatical.

So one of the things that I think the table can be really proud of over the past couple of years is our conscious investment in building this community where our pastors can actually take a sabbatical every sort of three to five years. For a couple of reasons. One, because if you create a church where if the pastor steps away for more than 20 seconds, everything falls apart, you end up with Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll and any other number of examples of disastrous church leadership.

But secondly, and more importantly, and this is what I want to get us to think about today, is that as a pastor of a church, you're busy. There's always stuff to do. There's a church to run. There's the website to update. There's announcements to write. There's a sermon to write. There's someone that needs crisis care. There's a monitor that doesn't turn on on a Sunday morning.

And it's hard to engage in intentional spiritual formation when you're constantly running around doing other things. That's why Pastor Tanetta hasn't been here for the past few months and why Pastor Anthony went away for about three months last summer. They were out on sabbatical engaging in this conscious effort of spiritual formation. Which leads me to our next question.

So I ask you to think about and reflect on what your healed self looks like. And so I'm going to invite you again in a minute to think about what do you need to get to that version of your spiritually healed, spiritually formed self?

[20 : 28] Now, to be clear, we can't all take three months sabbaticals or go for a wander of 40 days in a desert. But if we know what our, or have an idea of what our spiritually healed, spiritually formed self looks like, we can perhaps sketch out a plan of how to get from where we are today to what that person looks like. And maybe it's consciously engaging in community on a regular basis. Maybe it's reading, learning more. Maybe it's trying new things. Maybe it's serving.

Please don't kill me, Anna, but maybe it's stepping back from serving. Maybe it's therapy. Maybe it's self-reflection. Maybe it's spending time in nature. Maybe it's something else. But I'm going to ask you again to take a minute, write, draw, reflect, think about how you get from the person that you are today to this spiritually formed vision of yourself. And I want to be clear, this isn't like a strategic plan or some grand design for your life. This is a couple of steps that you can take to move yourself closer to your spiritually formed self. So take another minute or two, hang on, and Paul will very generously play for us again. We're almost at the end, I promise. By the end of this, you will have a full vision of your spiritually formed self. So I want to finish by looking at the very end of this passage. And I want to acknowledge that there's plenty of beautiful, thoughtful preaching that has gone into observing and reflecting on the fact that God didn't speak to Elijah through an earthquake, a wind, or a fire, but this still, small voice.

But I want to actually to close by paying attention to what that still, small voice said to Elijah. And firstly, I think it's kind of amusing that God asks Elijah, what are you doing here, when Elijah's already been asked that question? But he proceeds to give the exact same answer both times. I've been very zealous for the Lord Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death. I'm the only one left. I am the only one left, and they're coming for me too. And maybe, maybe God rolls their eyes.

But maybe, maybe God knows that all of the plans for spiritual formation, all of the dreams that we have, all of how we get from A to B, aren't going to be enough. Because after Elijah gives his self-pitying spiel, in response, God says, go back the way you came. Go to the desert of Damascus. And when you get there, anoint Hazael as king of Aram. Also, anoint Jehu, son of Nishmi, over Israel. And most importantly, anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet. God explicitly addresses in that moment, Elijah's claim that he's the only one. He says, we will change the leadership. The people who are out to kill you will be replaced. But I have your replacement. I have your community lined up next to you. You are not alone. You are not by yourself. And so I want to close us with a final question, coming back to Reverend Samuelson Roberts devotional, where she shares this word on healing.

She says, healing isn't just a self-referential process. It also moves us toward community, towards a more just world. Elijah's healing and his encounter with God did not lead him to become a hermit on a hill. God explicitly says, go back, because community awaits.

[24 : 18] So I want to close with this final question, and then Joe will come up and do communion. Who or what is the community for your healed and spiritually formed self? This may be people you don't know. It might be sort of, my community is social justice people. My community is artists.

My community is healers. Or it might be very specific. My community is the table. My community is the Northwest small group. But let's take just a couple of minutes before Joe comes up and leads us in communion to think about where your healed self finds, contributes to, grows in, and is spiritually formed in community. What does that community look like, and how do you fit in?

And then Joe will come up and take us to communion. And then Joe will come up and take us to communion.