

Divine Nudges

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church

United Church of Christ

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This morning I am going to read just a portion of Elijah's story found in 1 Kings. Before I do, I want to set it up for you a bit.

Elijah was a prophet. Three years before the snapshot found in this text that I will share with you this morning, Elijah was sent to confront the idolatry of the Baals by announcing a drought as punishment on the nation of Israel. A contest was arranged between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to determine once and for all just who was the real God of Israel. Each would build an altar for their god and then a sacrifice would be made. The god who answered by fire, consuming the sacrifice, would be the winner. All day long the prophets of Baal danced and prayed, sang and prayed, whined and prayed, all without result. Finally, at the end of the day, Elijah prayed his relatively short prayer and God answered with a dramatic showing of fire! So, Elijah succeeded! The prophets of Baal had been exterminated, and Elijah's job was over. Basically, Elijah had worked his way out of a job, and Queen Jezebel had issued a death threat on this life. Now we find Elijah exhausted and depressed and unsure about who he is now that his job is over.

1 Kings 19:4-8

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 any of my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 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. 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.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

“It is enough, now!” Elijah says to God. The new international version says it even more clearly, “I have had enough!” Here is a guy who has had great success, who has known God has been with him – who has even seen God in very dramatic ways. One might wonder why he was so depressed. But through his own success he has worked his way out of a job, and Elijah no longer knows who he is!

Who are we when we are no longer the prophet or the provider, the husband, or the caretaker? Who are we when we are no longer the 1st string quarterback or the person everyone always turns to? The question can bring us to our knees.

Whether we have worked our way out of a job, received a pink slip, experienced a great loss, or are just plain fatigued, depression can set in with any of us. The kernel of truth in this story, and the ray of hope for the Elijah’s amongst us, is that when we are discouraged and feel like giving up, God puts angels in our midst to nudge us along and keep us going. Whether you are here this morning because, like Elijah under the broom tree, you don’t really know where else to go, or you were dragged here, or you just came on autopilot because it is what you always do, my prayer is that you are able see and receive something this morning that will help sustain you for the coming days.

Throughout the years I have met many Elijah's, and I have had the lovely view of seeing the angels in their midst. This morning I want to tell you about a just a few of them. I have switched up the names and the specific circumstances, but each of these stories is true.

“Kathy, I just had to call you and tell you that I am so sorry I haven't been in church. I have just been in a funk, and I haven't been able to get myself out of bed in the morning. It has been years since my husband died, but suddenly the grief has set in. It feels like I should be over this, but I am not. I will be doing something simple like setting the table and pulling out two spoons, because in that moment I forget that he isn't with me. Then, when I realize what I am doing, that will thrown me back into a funk. I still miss him so much.

Anyway, that *isn't* what I called to tell you. What I called to tell you was that just when I was getting upset with myself for not coming to church and not doing a million other things I normally do, I got three phone calls in the course of one hour. It felt like it was so out of the blue! Judy, Hazel and Tom all called within the course of an hour just to let me know they were thinking about me and had missed seeing me. They were like angels. I am still struggling, but I will be back in church next Sunday.”

When we are discouraged and feel like giving up, God puts angels in our midst to nudge us along and keep us going.

You may know about our prayer shawl ministry. Many members of our congregation knit or crochet shawls that can be taken to members and friends of St. John's who are sick or recovering

from something, or simply going through a very difficult time. The shawl is a tangible expression of our prayers for this person. (If you would like to make one or sponsor one or you have an idea about someone who should receive one, be sure to let us know). Anyway, I am often the person who gets to deliver these shawls, and I get to witness the encouragement the recipient often feels from this gesture.

One woman called and said, “Please be sure to let the people who make these know how much it means to me. I don’t go anywhere without mine. I watch TV with it. I take naps with it. I take it to the doctor’s office with me! I can’t explain it, but just having it with me helps me keep going. I guess it makes me feel as though I am not alone.

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I approached two people, one who I knew and the other who I didn’t. They were talking, but it looked like a casual conversation, and I sat down to join them. The gentleman I knew, Chris, quickly introduced me to his friend.

“Hi Kathy, let me introduce you to Julie, we haven’t seen each other in three years so it is great to be reconnected.”

“Hi Julie, nice to meet you. What do you do?”

That was the *wrong* question.

Immediately, Julie burst into tears. She tried holding them back with her napkin and by holding her breath, but she just couldn't.

Chris didn't miss a beat, and he answered for her: "Julie is a great cook, and she ballroom dances and she is a passionate advocate for children's literacy. You have just forgotten, and so today I am going to help you remember who you are."

The litany brought a smile to Julie's face, even as the tears kept coming. As I began to learn, Julie had lost her job, was facing serious medical issues, and was on the verge of losing her home. This is someone who felt like giving up! Even though Chris didn't begin to solve all of her problems, he gave her what she needed to keep going in that moment. He helped her remember who she was.

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Finally, I remember my own dark period when I needed to lean on friends. I remember calling one friend late at night, and she invited me over to her home. We sat in her living room at 2:00 a.m., and I cried and talked and cried some more. I remember saying, "I have got to get over this. I know I am going through some stuff, but I am not sleeping, I am not thinking clearly, and it feels like all I am doing is leaning on my friends. I have nothing left to give others. What good am I?"

And my wise and dear friend said, “Kathy, you will get to the other side of this and when you do, rest assured, you will have plenty of opportunity to do this for others.” That night she gave me a Tupperware container of homemade vegetable soup to take home with me. For several days it was all I felt like eating, but it was just enough.

Sometimes we are Elijah and sometimes we are the angel. Sometimes, when we are in shock, we can't see that the angels there and the sustenance they are offering. Sometimes it takes several visits (as it did with Elijah) to help us get back on our feet.

The angels don't come to us from a cloud out of the sky; the angels are people like Judy, Hazel, and Tom who picked up the phone, people like Chris who introduced me to his friend, and my friend who invited me over in the middle of the night. I am almost certain that most angels never know they are angels or what they have done or what they are doing for another. But they are always here in our midst.

The sustenance they provide doesn't always come in the form of cakes baked on stones and jars of water. Sometimes the sustenance comes in a phone call, a prayer shawl, or in a Tupperware container of vegetable soup. Or anyone, at any time, who helps us remember who we are.

Thanks be to God for all of the divine nudges that keep us going.

Amen.