

FUEL FOR THE JOURNEY
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1 KINGS 19: 3-8 (NIV)...Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 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 have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 9 There he went into a cave and spent the night.

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As I mentioned last Sunday, I have thoroughly enjoyed watching the Summer Olympics this year. I'm actually rather sad that it ends tonight! From rugby to swimming to track and field to table tennis, it's been such a joy to watch athletes from all around the world come together, united in sport. While it's all been so exciting to watch, I, like many of you, find myself the most excited to tune in to watch the USA women's gymnastics team, particularly the flying phenom that is Simone Biles. Simone Biles is the most decorated American gymnast and the second-most decorated gymnast of any nationality. At this year's Olympics, she acquired her seventh gold medal and became an 11 time Olympic medalist. She is truly one of the greatest athletes of all time.

As Simone prepared to compete this year, I was reminded of her experience at the last Summer Olympics. As you may remember, the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Japan were postponed until 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Simone was selected to be on Team USA's women's gymnastics team that year, her second Olympic appearance. She was favored to take the gold in nearly every event, including the all-around

competition. However, as the team arrived in Tokyo and began training for the start of the games, it quickly became apparent to everyone on Team USA – Simone, her coaches, and her teammates – that something wasn't quite right with Simone Biles. She was landing out of bounds, falling off of the beam and bars, and miscalculating her runs toward the vault. She wasn't performing the way the world expected her to, but she tried to stick it out. When it came time for the team event finals, Simone started out on the vault where she had a major stumble. To the untrained eye, it looked like she just had one bad vault, but to gymnastics experts it was clear that Simone was struggling with something far deeper than that. In gymnastics, they call it “the twisties.”

While it has a kind of cute and silly name, the twisties are actually incredibly dangerous. It refers to something that occasionally happens to gymnasts where essentially their brain and their body stop communicating fully with one another. As Simone explained it, she was having a mental block where she was losing track of where she was in the air, how many twists and flips she was doing, and where her landing spots were. When she'd run toward the vault, she had no idea what was going to happen when she hit the springboard. As you can imagine, this can lead to very serious injuries. There's no singular reason why gymnasts get the twisties, but in Simone's case, she believes it stemmed from the tremendous amount of pressure she was under to repeat her success from 2016. Out of an abundance of caution, and to give her teammates their best chance at medaling, Simone made the incredibly difficult decision to pull out of the 2020 Olympics. She began seeing a therapist and working on her mental health almost immediately which enabled her to begin healing and working towards this year's Olympics. Unfortunately, the broader public did not understand the dangers of the twisties on gymnasts and Simone found herself being widely criticized for her decision to pull out of the competition. She had public broadcasters and sitting politicians criticizing her on social media calling her “weak” and “selfish.” People were accusing her of dropping out of the competition out of embarrassment over her poor vault. The comments section beneath all of her social media posts were filled with people mocking her ability, her appearance, and even her family. Eventually, as other gymnasts began speaking up about their own

experiences with the twisties and explaining just how dangerous it can be, people began to cut her some slack. But just some.

The truth of the matter is, Simone Biles's decision to not compete further was born from a place of wisdom. Simone listened to her body. She knew that to keep pushing forward when her body and mind were in such a vulnerable place would not do her, or her country, any good. She knew the criticism would be swift and cruel. She knew that people wouldn't understand, and that they'd use it to question her athleticism. But instead of letting her ego get in the way, she took a step back in order to take care of herself. Clearly, this decision paid off as she was able to avoid a career-ending injury and worked her way back to this year's Olympics.

What I love about this story is that it conveys quite brilliantly that even the strongest, most successful athletes have moments where they need to slow down and take care of themselves. Likewise, our scripture passage this morning conveys something similar – that even the most faithful and most effective prophets need to do the same.

The Prophet Elijah is not an Olympic gymnast, but he is experiencing his own intense physical ordeal, as he finds himself journeying through the wilderness. One might even call his experience a sort of “spiritual twisties.” In the chapters leading up to ours, Elijah has endured a traumatic episode with the prophets of foreign Gods Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel. Although he successfully proved them to be false Gods and demonstrated his God's true power to King Ahab, his success doesn't leave him feeling confident. Rather, Elijah experiences a sense of shame or failure. His spirit is rattled, leaving him feeling hopeless and depressed. He's clearly in a really bad mental state as he turns to God and says, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors,” before he lays down to die. Now, we don't know for sure what it is that makes Elijah feel this way, but it seems like – similar to Simone Biles – he's under tremendous pressure, working at a breakneck pace. He's exhausted. He hasn't been taking care of himself. So, no matter how successful he's been as a prophet of God, he can't enjoy it because his body, mind, and spirit are hanging on by a thread.

In response to this God does something amazing. God doesn't treat Elijah the way those critics treated Simone Biles. God doesn't criticize

Elijah for being weak of faith. God doesn't call Elijah selfish or accuse him of being lazy or entitled. Instead, God sees his good and faithful servant on the brink of collapse and has compassion for him. God sends an angel to care for Elijah, and the angel wakes Elijah from his sleep and says, "Get up and eat." Elijah is confused because he has nothing to eat. That's part of the problem. He's literally wandering in the wilderness, but when he looks up he sees that God had provided bread and water for him. He eats, and immediately falls back asleep showing just how worn out he is. After a while, the angel wakes him again and says, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Elijah does as instructed and the rest and sustenance does his job. The text tells us that Elijah was strengthened by this food, enough to continue his journey for 40 more days and nights.

Now, compared to so many other stories of the Prophet Elijah's life, this one tends to get overshadowed. It's not a story of God's power enabling a prophet to do the improbable. No one is cured of leprosy. No wars are won against mighty armies. But this story tells us something just as important about the nature of God than any of those stories would tell. God is sometimes described as omnipotent, meaning all-powerful; omniscient, meaning all-knowing; and omnipresent, meaning present everywhere at all times. God, however, is also infinitely good and compassionate. Elijah was struggling and God not only showed up, but gave Elijah permission to take a minute and care for himself.

Taking care of ourselves is often something that is really hard to do. Probably, in part, because we buy into the lie that Simone Biles' critics said that taking care of ourselves is somehow selfish. But it's not because taking care of ourselves is how we fuel ourselves for the journey. If you've ever been on a plane recently, you might know that in the pre-flight safety presentation the flight attendants will tell you that in the unlikely event that the cabin experiences sudden pressure loss, oxygen masks will drop down from above your seat. If that should occur, those traveling with other people should make sure to secure their own face mask before helping others, including children. Now, this instruction goes against our nature, especially for parents. We want to make sure that the people we love are good before we take care of ourselves. However, if you pass out from a lack of oxygen because you were worried about everyone else, then you can't help

anyone else. The same principle is true in other aspects of life. If you aren't taking care of yourself, you end up without the energy to take care of anyone.

We are called to be good stewards of God's creation. Typically, we think of that calling in terms of loving our neighbor or caring for the planet. However, as human beings made in the image of God, we are also part of God's creation. Therefore, God expects us to be good stewards over ourselves. Our bodies, minds, and spirits need tended to not just by God and our support systems, but also by us. We have been entrusted with the gift of our lives and our beings and those gifts deserve to be treated well. God wants us to keep our bodies nourished and rested. God wants us to keep our minds at peace. God wants us to make sure it is well with our souls. Sometimes, that means taking a step back, saying no on occasion, going on a vacation, or asking for help.

Now, as part of an interconnected community, we can also help support one another in our self-care. When people tell us that they're not doing well, that they need help, or that they need a break, we can choose to support them. Thank them for their honesty and ask how you can help. Also, it's important to remember that sometimes people don't have the words for how they're feeling or what they need. But we can still pay attention to the warning signs. Just like how Simone Biles' coaches and teammates could tell something wasn't quite right, if we are paying attention we can also often tell when the people we love are struggling. Sometimes what people need is to be given permission to take care of themselves or to be reminded that it's not selfish to take a rest, or snack break, or to say no when you're overwhelmed by your responsibilities.

God loves us and wants us to take care of ourselves. There is so much that God has planned for us, important work that can only be accomplished if we're taking the time to fuel ourselves for the journey. So listen to your body, your mind, and your spirit. Take the snack break. Eat your dinner. Drink the water. Take a breather or a vacation. Ask for help. Admit when you can't do it on your own. God will be with you in that pause. God will sustain you with the fuel you need. And when you're fed and rested, God will join you as a companion on the journey wherever it is that God is calling you to go. Amen.