

“Running on Empty”  
1 Kings 19:9-18  
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, quiet our inner noise and focus our minds so we can clearly hear your life-giving Word today. Amen.*

In 1977, singer-songwriter Jackson Browne wrote *Running on Empty*. The song captures the grind of life on the road—the emotional burnout, the long miles, and the feeling of forging ahead aimlessly. He sings:

*Lookin' out at the road rushin' under my wheels  
Lookin' back at the years gone by like so many summer fields  
In '65 I was seventeen and runnin' up 101  
I don't know where I'm runnin' now, I'm just runnin' on  
Running on. Running on empty."*

I wonder if that describes you, too. You just keep going because you have to. You work hard, take care of the people who depend on you, and handle everything that's expected of you. Then one day, it hits you—you're completely worn out.

That's exactly what happened to Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Right after one incredible victory, he found himself sitting in a cave, scared, exhausted, and ready to quit.

**And that's where God met him**—not with rebuke, not with a lecture, but with rest, care, and encouragement. Only then did God send him back to the work ahead.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, let's step back and look at how Elijah ended up in that cave on Mount Horeb in the first place. Who was he running from?

Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab, who ruled the northern kingdom of Israel. She was a Phoenician princess who strongly promoted the worship of Baal and opposed the worship of the God of Israel.

Elijah confronted Ahab and Jezebel because of their idolatry. The conflict reached its climax on Mount Carmel. Elijah challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a public showdown.

They built two altars and placed a bull on each altar as a burnt offering. They agreed that the God who sent fire to consume the bulls was the true God.

The prophets of Baal were the first to call on their god, but nothing happened. Elijah then called on the God of the Israelites. God sent fire, and the bulls were consumed. Then Elijah called on all the Israelites who gathered for the showdown to kill the prophets of Baal, which they did (1 Kings 18:20-40). In a single afternoon, the religious system Jezebel built was dismantled.

When King Ahab told Jezebel what happened, she was furious. She sent Elijah a direct message: *"By this time tomorrow, you will be dead."*

That threat is what set Elijah on the run. The man who just stood fearlessly against 450 prophets ran for his life. He fled a hundred miles to Beersheba. He walked out into the wilderness. Completely drained, he sat down under a broom tree and begged God to let him die.

Notice how God responds. God doesn't scold him. Instead, God feeds him, gives him water, and lets him sleep.

Elijah wakes up, eats, and goes back to sleep. Before God gives him another task, God takes care of his basic needs.

Strengthened by that rest, Elijah travels forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb. He finds a cave to hide in. Elijah ran out of fear and burnout... but he ended up right where God could reach him.

Inside the cave, Elijah is ready to give up. God asks him a simple question: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Elijah vents: *"I've worked hard for you. But Israel tore down your altars and killed your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too."*

Elijah's fear was real. His fatigue was real. But his perspective was wrong.

God tells him to stand on the mountain for God is about to pass by. Then God sends a massive wind that shatters rocks, but God isn't in the wind. God sends an earthquake, but God isn't in the earthquake. God sends a

fire, but God isn't in the fire. After all that noise comes a **sheer, quiet silence.**

We love that part of the story, don't we? Our lives are noisy, and we need places where the noise stops so we can catch our breath and remember God is near.

**That's why worship matters—it gives us a moment to be still.** We come here because the world is loud. We come here because our lives can be noisy.

And sometimes we need to stop. To listen. To be still. To remember who we are.

But the story doesn't end in the silence. After the noise stops, God asks Elijah the exact same question: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Elijah gives the exact same response. The quiet moment didn't magically solve his problems. Jezebel was still threatening him, and he was still tired. But now...Elijah is reconnected to God.

And God tells him: **"Go back."** Go back and anoint new leaders. Anoint Elisha to carry on your work.

Now... when you are burnt out, hearing *"go back to work"* is the last thing you want. But God wasn't telling Elijah to just try harder. God was telling him **he didn't have to carry it all alone.**

God gave him Elisha. God reminded him that 7,000 others in Israel were still faithful. Elijah thought everything depended on his shoulders.

**It didn't.**

Maybe someone here needs to hear that today.

August is a strange month. For some, summer is already ending—bins are being labeled, professional development has begun, and 5:00 a.m. alarms are being set. For others, they're still soaking up every last bit of sunshine, rest, and freedom.

For teachers, this tension is more than a shift on the calendar. **It can be spiritual.**

Moving from the slower pace of summer back into the classroom can bring all kinds of feelings—excitement about a new school year, worry about what's ahead, and maybe even a little sadness that the time of rest is ending.

August invites us to begin again. But before rushing into what's next, we may need **to pause and remember** what God has been doing in us during this season of rest.

So, what has God been showing you? Where have you experienced the presence of the Holy? What has been restored in you? Those are worth remembering before the busyness begins again.

Our passage on Elijah may also speak to some of us here today, especially if you've spent your life being "the responsible one." Raising kids. Building careers. Serving in the church. Caring for everyone else.

Sometimes the hardest thing to learn—especially as we age—is that **we don't have to carry everything.**

Many of you are retired. I'll be joining that club soon myself.

Retirement brings freedom, **but it can also bring a different kind of fatigue.** You become full-time caregivers. You raise grandkids. You fill every blank box on your calendar with volunteering.

And because these are good things, things we do because we love people, **it can be hard to say no.** Before you know it, retirement feels like another full-time job—just without the paycheck.

One piece of advice I've already received from some of my colleagues is this: when you retire, take a year off from preaching. Give yourself some time to step back and breathe. But whatever you do, they said, don't take a year off from Sunday worship.

Hmm. Let's see. Taking a year off from preaching? I think I could handle that. But listening to other preachers for a whole year? I'm not so sure! As

my preaching professor in seminary once told us in class, "I love preaching; it's *preachers* I can't stand."

Jokes aside, others face a different struggle in retirement: **the loss of identity.**

When the job stops, you wonder: *"Who am I if I'm not doing this work anymore?"*

Add in doctor's visits... health changes... joint pain...It's easy to wake up on Monday feeling like you have nothing left to give.

If that's you today, remember how God treated Elijah. Your worth does not come from your calendar. It doesn't come from your productivity. You don't have to prove your value by staying exhausted. You matter simply because **you belong to God.**

Faithfulness doesn't always mean doing more. Sometimes, faithfulness means saying: *"I can't do that."* Or *"I need to rest."*

It means trusting that the future of your family, your church, and your community doesn't rest entirely on your shoulders. God is already at work in places you can't see.

So, if you're here because you're tired. **Then rest.** If you've been "running on empty," as that Jackson Browne song we mentioned earlier puts it, **stop running for a while.** If you've lost perspective, then **listen.** If you're carrying weight that isn't yours to bear...**let someone help you.** If you need to remember you are loved...**receive that love today.** If you need to know you aren't alone...**hear it now: You are not alone.**

When God eventually calls you to "go back," it might **look different than it used to.** It might not mean a heavy role or a full schedule. It might mean a simple phone call. A quiet prayer. Listening to a grandchild. A kind word to a neighbor.

**God isn't finished with you yet.** Rest when you need rest. Listen when you need to listen. And when it's time to take that next step, trust that God will give you the strength you need.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**