

Living With Courage and Resilience
Part 4: Elijah (Mindfulness)

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

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Scripture: 1 Kings 19:3-16

Some of you have already discovered it.

Some of you haven't noticed yet.

Some of you are suspicious, but not sure – wondering, and maybe waiting for more evidence before you make up your mind.

But we are not alone here.

This place is not just earth and sky, plants and animals, and us humans.

Funny things happen that add up to more than that.

Every great religion has been formed and continued by those who have discovered it – and wanted to know more.

Most of the time we stick to practicalities – and try to survive – get good grades, get good jobs, establish homes, keep comfortable and safe - and help others when there is enough left over.

But that's not all that life is about.

There is the spirit realm – and spirit beings – and some say God.

If so, then that is the most exciting – and then the most meaningful, thing of all.

If there is no contact, all religion is bunk.

Yet if there is contact, then learning how to plug in is the most important thing you will ever do.¹

When I was confirmed in 9th grade, I learned quite a lot about the Bible, Jesus, and the basic tenets of the Christian faith. I actually found it all rather interesting, despite my youthful age. Yet I never learned the most important and exciting thing you can know in this life: ***There is contact.***

We are intimately connected to a God who is far more aware of us than we are aware of us. Because of this awareness – and in spite of it – this God loves us beyond what is possible for the human mind to imagine. And this God is not only able, but willing, to guide us into our best possible life.

One of the primary resources for connecting with God is the resilience characteristic we are covering this morning. The ancients called it Temperance,

¹ Based on a writing by Rev. Bruce Van Blair

but in modern times, all that typically comes to mind when we hear this word is the attempt to ban alcohol in the early 20th Century. That's too bad. While Temperance may, in fact, lead one to abstain from alcohol in certain circumstances, the word that best teases out the ancient meaning of the term is Mindfulness.

According to Webster's Dictionary, Mindfulness is "the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis."

There's a lot of "static" in our connection with God. The static is there for a good reason.

Imagine, for instance, if your mother had a direct line into your head and you'd constantly heard her telling you, "turn left," or "turn right," or "take this job," or "turn down this job," or "marry this person" or "that one." Many people spend years in therapy just to learn how to turn off the voice of a parent in their head!

No matter how wise, loving, and enlightened your mother's voice might be, it would soon become oppressive. Who wants to live a life where, no matter what you think or feel, someone is always telling you exactly what to do? It's actually worse if they are always right. Then you couldn't ignore it. Soon, you'd become little more than a robot, living a life that is supposedly "yours," but really is only a life that is being lived by your mother.

So now imagine that the "mother" is God, and that God is, in fact, always right about what you should do. You might think you want to hear God clearly, all the time, but soon God's voice would be more oppressive than your mother's. So God doesn't give us the option. God makes the connection difficult, and difficult to maintain, no matter how much spiritual skill you develop to access it. If you are to receive God's guidance, therefore, you must actively will for the connection to be there. And you must develop the skills to cut through the static in the line.

Do you see the conundrum we all face? On the one hand, if we try to live life solely according to our own whims and desires, we will *never* live our best life. Yet, if the connection is too strong and clear, then whatever life we live won't be ours.

This is where Mindfulness comes in. Our story about Elijah's visit to the cave on Mt. Horeb shows us how Mindfulness works.

Elijah heads for a cave in the middle of nowhere because he's got a crisis on his hands. King Ahab has issued a death warrant on Elijah. Ahab is systematically hunting down all the prophets of Yahweh – Elijah chief among them – because they keep deciding to “go left” when the king orders them to “go right,” and they “turn right” when the king commands them to “turn left.” In other words, the prophets of God actively stand against most of Ahab's decisions.

I don't know about you, but if someone was after me with the intention of taking my life, it would be quite hard to think rationally, or with wisdom. It doesn't matter how “spiritual” I am, I'd be in a panic – and my worst decisions in life have always tended to be those I make when I'm feeling fear or anxiety. When fear takes over, it is nearly impossible to pray – to connect with God. Anxiety produces way too much static.

Elijah's decision to head for the wilderness where the authorities wouldn't be breathing down his back illustrates the first principle of Mindfulness: **Find your cave!** In other words, put yourself in a situation where you can clear your head and reduce the static. Go for a walk. Go on a personal retreat, even. Go somewhere where you feel safe and comfortable, and can spend some time with God. Put your cell phone on Airplane Mode. Take some deep breaths. Clear your thoughts. Remind yourself that, while God is always with you, you are rarely as aware of God's presence as when your mind is clear and free.

Once Elijah finds his cave, he shows us the next step to getting mindful: **Stop, look, and listen.** That's what our parents teach us when crossing a busy street, right? That advice is really about becoming mindful of your surroundings.

So once Elijah finds his cave, he doesn't turn his cell phone back on and start texting his friends. He doesn't take a selfie and post it on Facebook or Instagram. Nor does he Tweet out his every passing thought. No, he stops, rests, and quietly observes his surroundings.

By now you may be acquainted with a poem I'm fond of by David Wagoner called “Lost.” This poem reminds us why it is important to “stop, look, and listen.” Wagoner writes:

Lost.
Stand still. The trees ahead
and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here.

*And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers.
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it you may come back again.
saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you.
You are surely lost. Stand still.
The forest knows
Where you are.
You must let it find you.*

There is a deep principle of life at work here in this poem and in the story of Elijah at the cave: the more you pay attention to Creation, the more Creation will reveal herself to you. This is because Creation isn't just anyone's creation, but God's. It doesn't necessarily mean that a tree will speak to you, or that a little bird will whisper in your ear if you're listening. It means that when we are paying close attention to that which God has created and loves, we are actively tuning out the static by getting on the wavelength of God's work in the world, therefore God's presence. We're in the best position to hear God's voice.

The story tells us that when Elijah was paying close attention, he noticed a lot of things that, though dramatic, did not bear the "word of God" – things like a fire, an earthquake, and a wind storm. And yet, it was by paying close attention to these very things that Elijah was able to clear away enough static to overhear something being whispered without words, and being shown him without the aid of sight.

The story says Elijah heard a "still, small voice," but the Hebrew is actually better translated as the sound of "sheer silence."² It is the Nothingness in which the voice of Everything speaks.

Quantum physicists provide us with an analogy from God's Creation that speaks to this Everything-ness that exists in the middle of Nothingness, when they speak of something called the Zero Point Field. The Zero Point Field is a state that was discovered years ago when scientists created a pure vacuum – that is, space

² The actual Hebrew here is most literally translated, "finely powdered silence." It's kind of like the "sound" of freshly falling snow. You know it's snowing outside even if your eyes are shut because the snow subtly changes the acoustics of everything around you. That's its "sound."

where not a single molecule or atom is present – and at a temperature that is so low that no energy exists as well. They call that temperature Absolute Zero.

Curiously, when they eliminate all matter, and all energy, they find that something is still present in the vacuum. It is a form of energy, or more precisely, an “energetic state” that is capable of animating something as small as the electron in an atom even with no energy present. How they found this energy is a complicated story, but the quickest way to put it is like this:

If you inserted a single electron into this state of absolute, zero-energy, and nothing else was present besides that single electron and a tiny spring on which the electron could sit, gradually that electron would be expected to come to rest on that spring because no energy would be present to cause it to bob around on the spring. Yet when scientists essentially do the equivalent of setting an electron on a spring in a vacuum with a temperature of Absolute Zero, they find that the electron keeps on bobbing around on it and never stops. This is very, very strange because it means that some form of energy we don’t know about, or energetic state, is present. And if it is present there, it would be present in all of outer space. It would be present, in fact, throughout the entire Universe. They call this energetic state the Zero Point Field. It’s a field that connects everything in the Universe simultaneously, capable of animating something so small as an electron for eternity without any known source of power.

Imagine what would be possible if you could harness this energy. You could literally send a spacecraft to Mars (or to the farthest reaches of the Universe) without any fuel in the tank. It is no wonder, then, that years ago the Pentagon made finding a way to connect with the Zero Point Field one of its highest priorities.

So far as we know, the Pentagon has yet to find a way to harness the energy of the Zero Point Field, even after spending millions upon millions of dollars trying.³

Some people believe that the Zero Point Field is where God resides, as a state not only of infinite energy but infinite consciousness. Whether or not this is true, it is interesting that every major religion of the world knows that if you want to connect with God – with infinite consciousness – then you have to, in effect, put yourself in a state where your own internal energy is lowest, your thoughts are most settled, and you come as close to being Nothing as you can get. That’s

³ For more on this and the Zero Point Field in general, see Lynne McTaggart’s *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe* (Harper Perennial, updated ed., 2008).

when the magic happens. That's when you discover that there is more to the world than appears to the eye, and that we are connected to each other, and to God, in ways we can scarcely understand.

This is when the sound of "sheer silence" speaks loudest. Here in this "spiritual zero point field," where our consciousness comes closest to God's consciousness and everything is connected to everything else, God is able to reveal your next best step toward living your best life.

It's not "rocket science." It is simply a state of Mindfulness that has been known to human beings as far back as recorded history allows us to see. If there is truly nothing there – no "spiritual zero point field," no connection, no voice or presence of God, then all religion is bunk. But if something really is there, then learning how to be Mindful is the most exciting – and most important – thing you will ever do to live with courage and resilience.