

Taking a Time-Out
August 3, 2008
Oxford Circle Mennonite Church

Today is a special day for us at Oxford Circle. We're getting ready to release Pastor Leonard and his family from responsibilities at the church so they can take a 4 month sabbatical. So today we want to bless them through this service. Some people might think that sabbatical is a long vacation and they're going to be lounging on the beaches in Puerto Rico for 4 months. And they probably are going to spend some time at the beach but certainly not all the time. In the message today I want to talk about what sabbatical is and why it's important. I've titled this message "Taking a Time-Out."

Pastor Leonard used to play basketball. In basketball time-out is called when the coach wants to change game strategy or when the coach is trying to control the time or the flow of the game, or to make a change in players so key players can rest or something. In sports a time-out is about strategy and maximizing the opportunity to win a game. A sabbatical time-out is like a sports time-out in the sense that it allows the pastor time to rest and, in that time, God can do some strategic things. Let's look at the story of Elijah to see how this works.

In our text today, I Kings 19:1-18, Elijah takes a time-out. He leaves the action that's going on and goes out alone into the desert. In I Kings chapters 17 and 18, Elijah has been pretty busy. In chapter 17, God tells Elijah to tell King Ahab there is going to be a long drought in the land. For 3 years there is no rain or dew and famine spreads across the land. Then, at the end of 3 years, God tells Elijah to go to King Ahab because He is going to send rain. So Elijah goes and he confronts Ahab with the sin of idol worship that he and his wife Jezebel have led the nation into. Not only have the people been worshiping idols but Ahab and Jezebel have been putting the prophets of God to death also. So Elijah tells Ahab to assemble all the people at Mount Carmel and to bring all the prophets of Baal and Asherah, the idols they have been worshiping.

They all assemble at Mount Carmel and Elijah challenges the people. He says "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." Basically he challenges the prophets of Baal to a smack-down. They will both prepare sacrifices and the god who answers with fire from heaven that consumes the sacrifice is the one who truly is God. So the prophets of Baal prepare their sacrifice and pray and prophesy all day, cutting themselves and working themselves into a frenzy, and nothing happens. Then Elijah prepares his sacrifice and orders that it be saturated with 12 barrels full of water. Now if you've ever tried to light a campfire with wet wood, you know it just doesn't work. The people are probably thinking that Elijah is crazy. He's so saturated his sacrifice and wood with water that nothing will make it burn. But when Elijah calls on God, the fire of the Lord falls from heaven and burns up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the water and even the dirt. Basically it vaporizes everything and leaves a smoking hole. The people immediately fall down and cry out that the Lord is God. Elijah orders the prophets of Baal to be killed, God sends rain, and the drought is ended. If the story ended here it would be a great triumph for Elijah as a prophet. Revival has come and the people are turning back to God and God is pouring out showers of blessings. Let's all sing Amazing Grace and go home.

But instead we see in chapter 19 that Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah and he gets scared and takes off for the desert. He goes off by himself and ends up under a broom tree begging God to take his life. He's worn out. He's been used by God in a mighty and wonderful way, but it has exhausted him not only physically, but emotionally, and he just wants to die. Bishop Freeman told me that he read that preaching a sermon uses as much energy as an 8 hour day of physical labor. My thought was maybe I'll lose weight while Leonard's on sabbatical. But the point is that ministry is tiring. It takes mental and emotional energy to minister to people. One reason why we've started having more people available to pray with others on Sunday mornings is because after praying for about 6 or 7 people, Leonard and I are worn out. So one big reason for a sabbatical is to simply rest and renew one's strength.

Here in I Kings 19 Elijah is so worn out that an angel comes to feed him, not once, but twice, in order that he might have enough strength to continue the journey. Now, to me, it doesn't seem like a good time for Elijah to be taking off for the middle of the desert. There's the whole nation of Israel that's just turned back to God. Revival is happening and the people need someone to direct them as they repent and seek after God. They need spiritual care. But the prophet of God leaves. Who's going to carry on the work? Who's going to watch over the people?

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has thought is now the best time for Pastor Leonard to be leaving for Puerto Rico. We've just signed an agreement of sale on the new building. There is fundraising that needs to take place, there are plans to be made for selling this building and moving into the new building. There's so much that needs to happen in a short amount of time, plus all the other work of ministry as we have the festival coming up in a month and the annual reorganization meeting in Sept. with new people coming on church council, and then growth groups starting again in October. Who's going to carry on the work? Who's going to watch over the people?

Yet we see in the story of Elijah that, after he is strengthened by the angel, God leads him even further away into the desert to a cave on Mount Horeb and there the word of the Lord comes to him. There on Mount Horeb, away from all the exciting things happening back in Israel, the Lord Himself passes by and speaks with Elijah. You remember the story. There is powerful wind that shatters the rocks and then an earthquake, and then a fire. Big things happen on the mountain, but God is not in these big things. God speaks in a small way, in a whisper. God carried Elijah away from the big things that were happening in Israel so that Elijah could recognize God's whisper. Elijah was tired out by the big things and he didn't hear God in the wind, the earthquake and the fire. Instead God taught Elijah what His whisper sounds like. I hope that Pastor Leonard hears God whispering to him during these next 4 months.

In this story Elijah goes to the entrance or the doorway of the cave and it is there that God speaks with him. The entrance of the cave symbolizes the

place of transition. A doorway or entrance is the place where a person transitions from one space to another. God speaks in the place of transition. Is now a good time for Pastor Leonard to go away? It's probably the best time. We as a congregation are in the midst of big things, big transitions, as we look to moving to a new building and having the capacity to expand ministry. It's important that our pastor be able to recognize the whisper of God as we go through this time. As God is with him in the place of seclusion, away from the big things and the busyness that are happening here, it is my prayer, and I hope yours as well, that God speaks to Pastor Leonard in the place of transition and that he come back with a clearer vision of God.

What does God speak to Elijah in this place of transition? He gives him new direction and inspiration. He tells him to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed him as prophet. And he encourages Elijah by telling him there are 7000 people in Israel who have remained faithful to God and not worshiped Baal. Elijah is given encouragement and new purpose and direction as he talks with God. He thought he was the only one left who was faithful to God, but God lets him know he's not alone. God is acting much like a coach would in a basketball game. He's calling a time-out for His key player so He can speak new strategy to him. He's giving him time to rest and encouraging him. God is controlling the game. And Elijah is reminded of his dependence on God.

As Pastor Leonard takes time to go away, I pray that God will speak encouragement, inspiration and direction to him. As we are positioned in a place of transition, we need to hear clearly what God is saying to us, and our pastor does as well. We all need to be taking the time during the next 4 months to pray and seek to listen for God's voice. We all need encouragement, inspiration and direction for the future. We need to accurately discern what God is doing and know what He wants us to be doing. This is really an experience that we will all go through together. And we all need to remember that God is in control of the game. He makes things happen and chooses to invite us to work with Him as He builds His kingdom.

During these next four months we need to be praying for our pastor and his family that God would give them rest and renew their strength, that He would give them direction, encouragement and inspiration, and that they would recognize afresh the still, small voice of God. And we need to be asking ourselves how God wants us to be getting involved in new ways, how we can be ministering to one another and serving the congregation as a whole. As a body of believers we are committed to one another, to care for each other and to encourage each other in the faith. How can we be getting in the game?