

GOD MEETS US IN THE WILDERNESS

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Yeah. Use a prop. They said it'll be fun. They said. All right. How many of you here have ever run a marathon before? Raise your hands. Look at all of you. For those on camera right now, everyone's hand is up in Northwestern Fremont. You should be very jealous. I'm just kidding.

In any event, when you run a marathon, you got to really be dialed in. You got to be disciplined. You got to do a lot of math for all the miles that you have to put on to your legs. And so you got to think about, well, I want to run a sub four-hour marathon. If I do that, I'm gonna have to run at a pace of eight minutes and 40 seconds over the course of 26.2 miles. That's a lot of miles and that's not a slow speed.

You got to have everything dialed in though. Not just your pace, you work for months on making sure that your nutrition is dialed in. This is goo. Just so you know, it feels like boogers, but it tastes like salted watermelon. But you have to know at which points, at which miles your body is going to need caffeine, sodium, amino acids. You need to make sure that you've got your hydration plan in place because you're going to need the water before your body tells you that you're thirsty.

And so I did this all of it—salt tabs and my little fanny pack, goo packs, water and hydration. I looked amazing running through Wisconsin with my fanny pack and my headband on just so you know. But there were hundreds of miles and discipline that all went by the wayside as soon as I got to this starting line. My ego checked in and said, hey, bro, have you ever like led in a marathon before? I was like, no, I have not, that sounds like a wonderful idea. Whoo. Slipped a little bit there.

Okay. So after I registered for this non-canceled half or real marathon—it's called non-canceled by the way, because it was the only marathon in Wisconsin that, guess what, during COVID, wasn't canceled—and again, hundreds of miles, nutrition dialed in, water dialed in, everything ready to go until I got to that starting line and my ego took over and all of a sudden I said no, I'm gonna win the front miles of this marathon. I'm gonna go against all of my training and all of my discipline, everything else. And it felt wonderful. I was looking at everybody like ha ha, slow pokes for the first quarter mile.

And then the real fast people passed me and the people that should have been along with me passed me. And about mile 10, Grandma Schmigel pushing a baby cart passed me and humbled me pretty significantly. And there I was, all by myself. There's no one in front, nobody behind, nobody next to me to encourage me on to keep on going. I was all alone.

And there's one thing I didn't want and no runner wants: three letters after your name, D-N-F, and that stands for did not finish, and praise the Lord, I'm done with that part. Okay.

But that being said, the reason why we do this is actually kind of serious. There's not alone series. It's a serious topic to look around and realize there's nobody in front of you and there's no one behind you

and maybe there's nobody next to you. There are some people sitting here right now that aren't thinking about this race and not finishing; they're thinking about their life and not finishing.

I'm gonna throw up a couple of statistics to let you know that this loneliness epidemic—and that's what the World Health Organization is calling this—which actually has more of an impact than many of the cancers and some of the cardiovascular diseases.

The loneliness epidemic is affecting our world. You might be thinking about yourself, "Well, what does that mean? To what degree does that affect people?" Maybe it's just people outside of the church. Maybe people inside of the church have some kind of protection shield over them. Let's look at the stats.

22%—this is a stat as recent as 2024—22% of weekly church attenders, you and me, 22% of us report high levels of loneliness. Now just so you know, there are small levels of loneliness, there are moderate levels of loneliness as a part of this study, but high levels of loneliness though means you should probably get some help. I mean like actual—you may need to check yourself in somewhere.

And so if you are here right now and you are experiencing high levels of loneliness, you're here right now because you just needed permission to go get the help that you really need. You need to go check in somewhere. You need to go check in with some kind of professional that can help you because the high levels of loneliness category was the same category that led to DNF for life.

And what's interesting is this idea of being alone and loneliness is not just relegated to those who get to sit on the other side of the stage. What I found in study and research is this actually worse for those who minister in leadership roles. Did you know that? 64% of ministers in all the different ways of ministry—64% report high levels of loneliness.

And did you know that that yields another number that within the last year, because of loneliness, ministers of the gospel have reported that 33% have considered quitting full-time ministry in this last year because of loneliness? So not only do we have this loneliness epidemic in the chairs in the pews that may lead to a DNF, we also have the dude not finished—that did not finish—from all of those who are up here in leadership.

So there isn't any difference in the stats really between those who go to church and those who don't, and that's why it's an epidemic. But that's also why we should address this from this stage. Important issues that you struggle with and I struggle with need to be addressed from this word because none of us here should ever feel like there's no one ahead of us, no one behind us. Like there's no one ahead of us, no one behind us, no one next to us—that we're all alone and we might not finish.

So for this, let's get into the word because this is what's going to give us life. Our first text is actually going to illustrate to you that Elijah was a runner. So Elijah himself, after a period of great drought in the land, was given a word from the Lord that the drought would be lifted, the rains were going to come down, and so that he could tell everyone that God is faithful and present among his people.

And the king at the time, Ahab, couldn't get all the credit. Elijah tucked in his manskirt and he ran from Mount Carmel to the Jezreel Valley. That's what First Kings 18:46 says, and he was fast. He was faster than an 8-minute 40-second mile, apparently. The power of the Lord came on Elijah. He tucked his

cloak into his belt. He ran ahead of Ahab the king all the way to Jezreel. Bro, outran a chariot for a distance of about 20 miles.

So for my brothers and sisters who are at Northwest Campus today, if I were to run out these doors and run to you, it would be about the same distance at an incredibly fast pace. So I'll see you in approximately three days.

Alright, but Elijah had the Spirit of the Lord on him and he was able to make that kind of speed. And Elijah, as many of you probably know from even a cursory study of the scriptures, had a lot of victories to celebrate that the Lord had given through him. You probably remember how he stood up against all the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and he said, "You go ahead and pray to your God and see if he takes your offering by fire."

And they prayed and they cried and they cut themselves and they bled and nothing happened. And if you read the word, Elijah puts this great smackdown there. He's like, "Well, maybe your God's on the bathroom, maybe he's taking a porta potty break in the great race of life," which happens a lot. But then he called down the presence of the Lord after he soaked that wood in water multiple times, and the presence of the Lord manifested in fire—destroyed the wood, destroyed the water, destroyed the stones—and Elijah had a front-row seat for the whole thing.

And he was there for the drought. He saw the Lord bring down rain. But after that, in First Kings 19:1-4, something shifts in Elijah's heart.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Ahab was the king. Jezebel was the queen. They're against Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel were for idol worship, for worshiping this other god named Baal who wasn't really a god.

So Jezebel then, in First Kings 19, sends a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me be it ever so severely if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like one of them." So Elijah had done all these faithful works for the Lord and now he feared for his life.

And so what does Elijah do, in very Elijah-running fashion? Elijah was afraid and he ran for his life. And when he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, and this is a very important small detail I want you to pay attention to.

After all of these great victories, but then a little bit of oppression, there was one person who was with him, and he separates himself from that one person that could encourage him. He left his servant there while he himself then went a day's journey. So now he has alienated himself from help. He has separated himself within a day's distance.

He went into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush. He sat down under it, and then he prayed for a DNF. He prayed that he might die. "I've had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life." "I'm not any better than my ancestors."

This guy just experienced this astonishing victory and all this presence of the Lord and all of these experiences of God's presence in his life in powerful and mighty ways. He hadn't sinned, like he had

done what the Lord had said. And yet still he kept running on the treadmill at a faster pace than he could handle.

And so he gets to a point where he cannot handle life anymore. So he alienates himself from those who could help him. He separates by a day's journey those who could help him and then he goes off by himself.

And what do you think's gonna happen when we're off by ourselves and we're already exhausted and we're already alone and we're already suffering? We are primed to be picked off by our own sinful flesh.

How's the Lord respond? I mean, he could rebuke. He could correct and train in righteousness. He could have done all of those things and he would have been right to do so.

But instead, listen to the words of the presence of the Lord in the midst of Elijah's struggle, in the midst of his loneliness and separation.

So, yes, Elijah. So he got the rest and rejuvenation that his body needed. And all at once, an angel touched him. The angel said, "Get up and eat."

So he looked around and by his head was some baked bread over hot coals and there was some water there. So it's kind of like the Lord was saying through the angel, "I'm going to get up and I'm going to eat, and I'm going to eat, and I'm going to eat, and I'm going to eat." And he does that.

So it takes a little bit of a snack, adds a little water and he goes back to get the Sabbath that he needs because the Lord has said, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

So he eats and drinks, he lays down again, the angel Lord comes back a second time and touches him and says, "Get up and eat." And this is important.

This journey is too much for who? You. I want you to think about that. I want you to read yourself into the place of Elijah.

The Lord's presence is here to minister to you. The Lord's presence is here to minister to you. You might need some relaxation. You might need a time of Sabbath. You need some kind of nourishment into your body, into your soul.

Because this journey at this time in our existence when everything is moving more towards isolation, when your flesh is more likely to attack you, to make you think that you need to separate yourself from all of the help that the Lord could put around you.

Rest with the Lord because this journey is too much for you singular to handle by yourself.

And any runner is going to tell you, if you want to be able to make it the distance, you not only need replenishment, you not only need hydration, but you also need presence around you. That's why I started out this message with this story of this specific marathon running.

Because something really peculiar happened after mile 13. I went full moron and I was running with one cramped leg and I looked like, you know, like I was about 30 years older than I am because this one leg was just kind of hobbling out there.

And some random guy comes up to me and just runs next to me. He's like, "Hey man, I see you got a Bible verse on your shirt. Let's talk about that." I'm like, "Okay, sounds good." And so we just kept talking about it and talking about it.

A couple miles in no big deal. I'm still going, I'm actually feeling all right.

And I'm like, "Oh, oh got another cramp, you go ahead, you run ahead man. Thank you so much." He's like, "Okay." He runs a mile ahead.

By the way, this was the most boring marathon ever. You could see almost the entire track. It was terrible. But I can see him go, he runs a mile.

I start running again because I was stretched out, I'm ready to go. And guess what that dude did? He was a mile away and he ran a mile back to me. And he's like, "Hey, we were talking about First Corinthians. Remember when Paul was talking about running as if you're running for a prize? You remember that? Wasn't that great?"

Yeah, and so we just kept talking.

And I'm like, "Oh man, it's the other leg. It's messing up man, I'm gonna have to stop and I have to stretch out but I'm gonna keep going."

He's like, "Okay." He runs a mile ahead and guess what? He did again after that. He ran a mile back.

He did this four times. He ran a mile there and a mile back. He added an extra eight miles to his run so that I would have a presence right next to me.

And wouldn't you know that we got to mile 26.2 and there was this guy who had run the extra mile for me and we actually made it to the end because I wasn't alone.

And neither was Elijah. Because after this whole thing happened where the angel visited him, Elijah then went to a cave because he needed just a little bit more than food and water.

And there was this great wind that rushed by the cave and he was maybe thinking that the Lord would be in this great production of a wind, this great big moment in life.

But the Lord wasn't there.

And then this rumbling earthquake comes through and he was thinking, "Well maybe in this grand movement of majesty and power, maybe the Lord will be there."

But the Lord wasn't there in that.

And then a fire whips through. It's flashy and it's big.

And maybe the Lord would be in the big flash, this impersonal movement away from him.

But the Lord wasn't in the fire either.

No, instead, after all these big gigantic things passed in life, it was a still, quiet, small voice that the Lord made himself present in Elijah's life so that Elijah would not put in the DNF, did not finish.

So a lot of times we think that God is going to be in those big moments, and so we chase after the biggest moments in our lives thinking that's going to give us the fulfillment that we need.

And sometimes we think he's going to be in the biggest, flashiest fire or the loudest rumblings of the worst earthquakes.

And we think that he's going to be in the trauma of the whirlwind of life.

And yet I want to tell you that do not seek the Lord necessarily in all those big high moments.

Because the Lord reveals himself more in the quiet whisper of his everyday presence.

And that's how the Lord decided to reveal himself to Elijah who struggled.

And that's how the Lord reveals himself to you mile after subtle mile after subtle mile of just maintaining conversation with you, as you keep on walking, as you keep on crawling, as you keep on moving forward in life.

But what I want to tell you about is not just like a God who is going to be there and whispering to you.

I want to tell you about what happens to Elijah right after this because this is what speaks to you and me. And this is what addresses a loneliness epidemic because then it's the church that gets used to make sure that no one runs this race alone so that all of us can actually finish this race.

Because the Lord moves Elijah then to another community and he says in First Kings 19:18, "Yet I reserved 7,000 more in Israel."

He's saying, "You've got brothers and sisters you didn't know about them, but they're there."

Don't isolate, separate, alienate yourself because your flesh is going to take over. Come back to this community.

There are 7,000 people who have Jesus as their focus and the finish line of life and of faith as they walk together in their sights because they have not bowed down to Baal and they have not used their mouths to kiss their idols.

So he gives Elijah restoration, not just information, and gives him a community of people that can actually get up and move around Elijah so that he can finish the race so that he can see other people going the extra mile for him just like that other guy went the extra miles for me so I could finish my race.

This is the calling of the Christian community. In fact, Jesus teaches this in Matthew 5:41. He says, "Hey, if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two."

And the reason why is because back in this day a Roman soldier could go to any Roman citizen and say, "Here's all my gear. It's too heavy for me to carry. You must carry this for me at least a mile." And they were obliged to carry it for a mile.

And Jesus says, "No, no. That's not what we do in our community. We don't just walk one mile. We don't just carry everybody else's burdens for one mile. We go the extra mile. We add a mile."

And how beautiful is that as we think about Jesus? He is the one that looked at you and he said, "I see your desperation. I see how lonely you are right now, and I don't want any of my people to feel this way."

So he takes your gear, your trauma, your alienation, separation, isolation, sin. He takes all of it onto himself so that you don't have to carry it by yourself.

He goes up onto a cross and as he's on the cross with all of your gear and trauma and drama and everything else he takes it up there and suffers a loneliness that you and I will never have to suffer.

Because somehow in the mystery of the Godhead, he looks to his Father as he's carrying all of our sin and guilt and shame and everything else that we take into this world.

And the Father can only see what we've put on Jesus. So the Father sees our sin on him and the Father turns his back on Jesus, which is why Jesus cries out in a very specific way.

He says Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And as hard as that is to hear—a Father turning his back because of the sins that a Son was carrying—the gospel proclamation is that Jesus suffered the loneliness on the cross so that you don't have to.

So that you can give him your loneliness, you can give him your despair.

He desires to take that away from you.

He gives you this amazing community that's supposed to be running next to you.

You have the community of the Trinity.

You have a Father now that, because of what Jesus experienced on the cross, wants to be a part of your life.

He wants you to run towards him at the finish line.

Your Father's waiting with his arms completely open wide excited to see you coming home.

You've got a Jesus that would go to those lengths to take your burdens so that you can see the end of the line.

But you've got the Spirit.

The Spirit of God that dwells inside every single one of us so that we can keep running the race.

So that we can keep moving forward.

There's this really cool thing about the Holy Spirit and we don't often think or talk about the Spirit for some reason.

I think in Lutheran churches for some reason, we're like he's the quiet partner of the Trinity.

But he's the partner that works within the church.

He's the part that sees us when we're running.

And he's got this cool thing about his name in the Greek: the Holy Spirit's name is the Para-kaleo.

It means "the one who is called next to you."

I want you to think about that when you're thinking about the difficulties of life.

You need a group that the Spirit's going to move around you.

That he's going to call next to you.

They're going to encourage you to take the food that you need.

To get the right hydration.

And maybe that looks like they're going to call you to receive the Lord's supper with them.

Maybe that means that they're going to call you to remember the great faithfulness of his grace and baptism.

But maybe it means he's going to call you to a greater community.

So, how can you do that here? Doesn't matter what campus you're on—Millard, Fremont, Northwest.

We all have groups where we share life together, where the Spirit works through all of us.

But we're thinking about our baptism and falling.

If I fall, can you help me?

Thank you.

It's what a good community does.

I got to remember that for the next service.

But we have small groups that study the word together, experience life together, and make sure that if you're alienated, separated, isolated, they recognize it.

They can call you up.

They can call you up, give you the encouragement that you need.

And they can go the extra mile.

Because that's what Jesus has done for you.

So that none of us ever should have to finish this race alone.

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank you for being the kind of Savior who walks in the constant presence of the everyday moments.

Thank you for sending the Spirit and I would ask, Jesus, that if there are those that are here right now and you've moved your Spirit in them to go get the help that they need, I would ask, Jesus, that you would allow them to be bold and go get the help that they need and that this church that you've placed together would support them as they recover, would encourage them with your word, guide them in grace.

Because Lord Jesus, we know that there is an epidemic of loneliness here.

But we know that through your word working through your people, we will never ever have to be alone.

Amen.