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Sermon Text: 1 Kings 19:4-8

TRUST GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN YOUR PERSONAL BATTLES

Each of us has personal battles, internal struggles, painful dilemmas, burdening challenges, ...maybe even a string of recurring crises. It can make us feel ever so alone – and hopeless.

The prophet Elijah felt that way. It was perhaps the greatest personal crisis of his life. Here in 1 Kings 19 God presents to us what He did for Elijah. It teaches us how God deals with His believers.

We can sum it up in a word: God's providence. You can hear the word "provide" in "providence." God's providence is the way He provides for all people, but especially for His believers.

As we contemplate today's reading from 1 Kings 19, let's learn to trust God's providence in our personal battles.

Terms like manic and bipolar are part our everyday vernacular. Elijah experienced something like this. After the highest height of his career, he came crashing down to the lowest low.

From a human perspective, times for God's Church in Israel were very bad. Queen Jezebel was systematically eradicating preachers of the true faith. Policy by policy, her administration was integrating a pagan philosophy into the fabric of society and public thought. It was a religion centered on a false god called Baal.

By God's command Elijah challenged the leaders, the bishops, the renowned scholars and all the clergy of the church of Baal to a sort of showdown. Elijah stood alone over against 450 prophets of Baal. Two altars they built. On each one they cut up and prepared a bull to burn as a sacrifice to their god. The challenge was both parties would pray to their god to cause their sacrifice to spontaneously combust. The god who answered with fire would prove himself to be the true God.

You can imagine the prophets of Baal, all 450 of them, along with their colorful entourage of musicians, attendants, and regalia. Imagine them as they began to pray, sing, dance and shout. The rhythms of the mass ritual intensified - the drums beating

relentlessly - the dancing grew wilder, the singing more shrill, all through the day until it climaxed in the act of slashing themselves with knives so that the blood gushed. It was a sensational show. Spectators would have been overwhelmed at the bewildering pageantry and the sheer obscenity of it all. These worshipers were serious. They spared no expense. Not even their own bodies. They were all in. Surely this religion must be real. It was most impressive. But as to the sacrifice on the stone altar... there was nothing. No fire. Not a spark.

When they gave up, Elijah called the assembly over to him. One man alone. As the crowd gathered around him he began to douse, to drench, his sacrifice with barrels of water. He had even dug a wide trench around the altar and that filled up with water. Then Elijah prayed to the true God. One quiet prayer from a man by himself. Suddenly, fire fell from heaven. A violent, all-consuming fire. It devoured the bull, the wood, the stones, the water in the trench and even the dirt around the altar.

The people were stunned. Here was incontrovertible proof of the true God. Elijah shouted, "Seize the prophets of Baal!" which the crowd did. So stunned were the people, so appalled at the abject sham of the Baal worship that had held them mesmerized, that right there and then, the people slaughtered the prophets of Baal – all 450.

A stunning victory! The highpoint of Elijah's ministry! Now maybe things in Israel would change. Now maybe people would begin turning back to the true God. But no, Elijah returned to the capital city. Nothing had really changed. Nothing was different. As a matter of fact Jezebel was still in power. Soldiers and officials still followed her orders. She dispatched a messenger to Elijah to tell him he was a walking corpse. She'd see to it.

So Elijah ran. What else could he do? That solitary pillar who stood for the true God and single-handedly vanquished the stronghold of Baal now had to scamper off like a dog with his tail between his legs.

Imagine let down, the fear, the exhaustion, the loneliness, the hopelessness. 1 Kings 19 says, "*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, 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.'* Then he lay down under a tree and fell asleep."

Perhaps your personal battles, whatever they are, have even made you feel the same way. That's why we need to trust in God's Providence. What I'm about to say is not intended

as a cure-all for a diagnosis of mental illness. If your leg is broken you may need surgery and a cast to start the healing. By all means, get the medical and psychological help you need. These things are a blessing. And yet, in addition to and above these things God has given us a salvation and a permanent cure by means of Christ's empty tomb.

In the meantime let's trust in God's providence. To trust in God's providence we need to recognize three things.

First, you are a servant of God. Not should be. Not at times. You are. Your baptism made it so. We may tend to think of personal battles in the sense that it's about me and how I feel. That's a heavy load. If we focus on our own feelings, how could we not despair?

But beginning with your Baptism, your life no longer belongs to you. You've been given a new life that is entirely aimed at serving Christ. Our feelings don't change that. This reality already starts to lift the weight of depression from us. If we are servants of the Great King, then He has taken ownership not only of us, but also of our issues and burdens and He is carrying them Himself.

Notice, God did not relieve Elijah of his responsibilities because of his depression. Elijah had a job to do. He still was a servant of God whether he felt like it or not. Are you a spouse, a parent, an employer, an employee, a citizen, a civil servant, a church member, a public minister, someone's child, a student, a grandparent? These are all God-ordained vocations here on earth by which you serve Him. God hasn't dismissed you from these either. Not because He is heartless. But because He loves you.

You see, a by-product blessing of serving God in His providence is that He rescues us from soul-destroying self-absorption. There is comfort in being able to say, "This is where God wants me. This is what God wants me to do. He says so in His Word. Therefore I'll continue with my duties until God gives me relief. God will be my focus. Not me."

So the first thing to recognize as you trust in God's providence is that no matter how you feel, you are a servant of God.

As we serve Him, sometimes God permits us to fail, suffer disaster or may not enable us to gain the upper hand on our mental health to remind us of a second important truth: You are helpless before God.

So often aren't we searching for that magic bullet, that one elusive fix to the problem? We chase that ghost and yet it ever haunts us. Maybe in fact, we've been faithful and responsible, but we still get clobbered. That's how Elijah must have felt. "But what can you do?" We say that a lot, "But what can you do?"

Incidentally that's why a Lutheran preacher will not spend much time speaking about how-tos in his sermons. If it were as easy as that, you wouldn't need Jesus. Dr. Phil would be enough for you. But you see, the bottom line is our sinfulness. That's what makes us helpless before God. That's why we have so many personal battles. That's why Satan can toy with us in so many cruel ways. Our personal battles, really any sufferings in general, remind us how desperately we are in need of a Savior. We don't tend to think of ourselves that way – as being *desperately* in need of salvation. We tend to think of ourselves as decent people who are doing alright. So God has to convince us and sometimes He makes it hurt and makes it personal just so we don't too quickly forget. *So the second thing we need to recognize as we trust in God's providence is that we are helpless before God.*

When that realization hits you, then be assured by this third truth: You are provided for by God. First of all, He has provided you a Savior. We Lutheran Christians cannot even think of God's providence without beginning here. Jesus Christ took all our shortcomings, our inabilities, our irresponsibilities, our failures, our self-absorption, our lack of joy or hope or faith or enthusiasm for certain tasks – anything that makes us feel guilty and He made the guilt His own. He was sentenced to death for it on the cross as though He were the guilty one. He took the blame so that you would be off the hook. By His death Jesus secured for you God's forgiveness, God's totally uninhibited, wholehearted friendship and God's loving providence.

What does that providence look like? The Bible says, "*He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will he not also along with Him graciously give us all things?*"

Listen to how God provided for Elijah. We read, "*All at once an angel touched Elijah and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 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.' 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.*"

Elijah's depression was not cured just yet. We are more complicated creatures than that. But God provided for Elijah what he needed for the day –enough to get him through to the next stage of His help which would take place at Mt Horeb.

We might consider it miraculous that the food the angel prepared for Elijah enabled him to travel for 40 days across the wilderness. But why is that any more miraculous than dinner getting you through the evening, or breakfast through the morning? God has all things at His command –angels, food, metabolism, where a broom tree grows, sleep, even Jezebel's troops which must have been searching for Elijah –and God uses them to provide for his believers or prevents them from harming his believers. He pays attention to detail, yes even the details of your own personal battles as you serve Him in His providence. He does it for the sake of your salvation and the salvation of others. He loves it that you are entirely dependent on Him because that is how He saves you in the first place.

So let us remember these three things as we look to God's providence in our personal battles:

First, you are a servant of God. You have duties to fulfill.

Even so, secondly, you are helpless before God even as you strive to fulfill those duties.

Therefore thirdly, look away from yourself and trust that you are provided for by God.

God's providence, His promise to provide for you, is not dependent on you, or how you're feeling, or whether you have a strong faith or a weak faith, or how much you've accomplished or whether you have your act together. It depends only on Him and His faithfulness because Jesus has taken all your sins away. Let us take comfort then in God's providence. Let's trust in God's providence in our personal battles.