



I want to tell you this morning that there are seasons in the Christian life. There are Spring seasons where there is new growth, where new life bursts forth out of winter dormancy. Then there is a Summer season when our walk with God is warm and lush, and deepening and maturing fruit appears behind the lush leaves. There is the Fall season where there is a great harvest, and you know that it isn't you but it's God using you for his glory. Then there is Winter. Maybe it's cold, maybe it's dark, but you know God is present and he is faithful and Spring will return again.

And then there is drought, seasons when we look out and think to ourselves, "There is nothing there." Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter? It doesn't matter what season it is. There is nothing there. There is no growth; there is no life; just drought.

Have you ever looked out over the horizon of your life and said, "There is nothing there."? Deep down in your soul you know God is real. In fact what a great reminder we had last week when we saw God reveal himself in a spectacular fashion on Mt. Carmel to the prophets of the false God Baal and the people of Israel. But for you it's been a long dry stretch. When was the last time you sensed that God was personal to you? When was the last time you sensed that God seemed powerful in your circumstances?

Have you grown tired of being told by well meaning people, "Just trust God" or "God has a plan" or "Cast your cares upon him" or "God has a good reason for what is going on in your life right now"? Do these kinds of phrases seem more like clichés than life-giving words? You may have clung to these words in the past, but they don't help you in the pain and fear you're experiencing today.

You look out toward the horizon and there is nothing there. You look back into your past and the faith and fire that was once so vivid to you looks today more like a fading photograph. Has your faith become nostalgic, not even real anymore? Like those videos of your children when they were small. Were they really ever that small? I forgot how cute they really were. Was my hair really that brown? Was my waistline really that thin? Did God really show up back then, or am I just imagining that he did?

It's right for us to be reminded that some of the greatest saints that ever lived had seasons of spiritual drought. Take CS Lewis for example. The man who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* also wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain* in 1940. He wrote it from Oxford during WWII when England was under attack from the

Nazis. He addressed the question: "How could a good God allow this kind of torment, this kind of suffering in the world?" He wrote in a season of spiritual plenty, not drought.

He hadn't experienced much pain when he wrote the book. He had made a decision not to get married. But years later he met a woman named Joy Davidman. Lewis fell head over heels in love with Joy. During their courtship Joy was diagnosed with cancer. He thought he was going to lose her but he also realized how much he loved her so they got married. The cancer miraculously went into remission. They had two blissful years together traveling the world, and then the cancer came back with a vengeance and Joy died. Twenty years after he wrote *The Problem of Pain* Lewis, personally devastated, wrote *A Grief Observed*. "But go to him when your need is desperate; when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once." He wrote it out of a spiritual drought. He looked out over the horizon and said, "There is nothing there."

Chuck DeGroat, in an article entitled, *Finding God in the Dark* wrote: "It's amazing that this children's novelist who wrote about Aslan, the great lion who would rescue vulnerable children, could now find himself in a place where he wasn't even sure there was an Aslan or a God. And if there was a God, all Lewis knew was that God was keeping him out, bolting a door, making himself inaccessible.

"When you look through the course of church history, you will find literally hundreds of stories like this one—people struggling with God, finding themselves in places where God seems incredibly distant. Think about Mother Teresa, who later on in life wrote this to a very good friend of hers: 'Jesus is a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.'"

In our text this morning the first thing we see is a literal drought. It didn't rain for three and a half years. The people of Israel looked out over the literal horizon and there was nothing there. It's clear that God brought this drought upon Israel as a consequence of the evil king Ahab establishing Baal worship in Israel.

I'm not here to argue why droughts happen. They happen. There are physical and spiritual droughts. I'm more interested in

observing through the life of Elijah three reasons to hope when you are in a season of personal spiritual drought, when you look out over the horizon and you see nothing. My prayer this week is by the grace of God each of us will see the other side of nothing and be filled with hope, not clichés.

This Side of Nothing is Drought

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe (little tiny town) **in Gilead** (south of the Sea of Galilee and east of Jordan River to the Dead Sea), **said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word”** (1 Kings 17:1).

We are enduring a drought in California, so imagine three and a half years of no rain. There would be little children who never splashed in a puddle, or made a mud pie, and didn't even know what an umbrella was. In the desert, over 100°, you step on the dead grass and it crunches, dust flies in the air and fills your nostrils, the cattle have died, sheep are dead, even the camels are losing their humps, people are malnourished, weak and susceptible to disease.

And a spiritual drought? In your desert, there is nothing—no money, no way, no love, no chance, no change, no hope. Just quit, the enemy says, quit hoping, quit expecting, quit dreaming, quit looking, quit praising.

Someone needs to know today that just beyond nothing is something. The other side of nothing is a promise from God.

The Other Side of Nothing is a Promise

I know for some of us it's almost impossible to believe that. I know it's hard to keep marching when there is no sign of change. I know it's hard to keep tithing and sowing seed when you are in financial famine. I know it's hard to praise God for life and breath when your body is wrecked with pain. I know it's hard to stay positive when everything you see is negative. I know it's hard to believe for rain when you've been in a drought so long. You read the weather forecasts and there is no rain in sight.

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: (the jet stream was about to change) **“Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.” So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab** (1 Kings 18:1-2).

And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go and eat and drink, (“Celebrate” is what Elijah probably wanted to really say to Ahab, Ahab, you are still the king, a real loser, a reprobate, keep it G-rated, but God is showing you grace, pull your head out, go celebrate, eat and drink) **for there is the sound of a heavy rain”** (v. 41).

The sound of heavy rain? You get the idea that he was literally hearing the woosh of a storm front moving in or the roll of thunder in the distance. But in the next few verses we see the context and we learn that there was not a cloud in the sky. What

was that sound? It's quite likely what Elijah was hearing was the sound of God's voice.

In the original language the Hebrew word translated as “sound” here is usually translated “voice” and refers to “the sound of a voice.” Elijah was certain the rain was coming, not because he heard the sound of rain itself; he was certain because he was claiming the promise of God in chapter 18:1–2.

We all need to remember that the other side of nothing is a promise from God. A promise from a good, a powerful, and a personal God. So what do we do while we wait in the desert? What do we do to realize that promise? We follow Elijah's example: We pray. In the drought we pray.

This Side of Nothing is Prayer

So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back” (verses 42-43).

The actual verb “to pray” is not recorded here, but Elijah's body language says it all. This is the posture of intense, concentrated prayer. So when “There is nothing there,” we are taught to pray.

What do we learn about prayer? Elijah went to the top of Carmel. He separated himself. He gets away, away from the confusion, the noise, the distractions. Now granted, we can't always get away, but we can find a place where we can separate and meet alone with God. One commentator said, “It seems a bit ironic to see Elijah's brash Baal busting prayers we saw in vv. 21-40 now turn to Elijah's humble posture here in verses 42-43.”

Could it be that there is another great lesson for us from this? After a great victory, humility doesn't usually follow. Elijah had just come through the greatest public victory of his life, and then went right back up to Carmel, back to the very place he called down fire from heaven to defeat the prophets of Baal, and he humbled himself before God. We see in Elijah a man we would call a hero, a man of courage who faced down the pagan priests of his day, humble himself before the greatest power of all.

1 Peter 5:6 says, *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up at the proper time.”* He prayed in specifics. He told his servant to look for one thing—a sign of rain. A lesson for us is be specific in your prayer life. If you need a job, pray for a specific job. If you have a specific fear, specific sin, specific relationship issue, call it by name. Seven times he told his servant to go and look on the horizon, to look on the other side of nothing. I see a lesson in persistence. When we are tested, it often comes through having to wait. Waiting brings perspective. Waiting teaches patience. God's timing is not my timing, but God is never late. Yet for greater purposes, he

deliberately delays. Seven times he said, "Servant, go back up and look." Six times the servant returns and says, "There is nothing."

When you're in a drought, get down on your knees and pray. Live the best life you know how. Read. Study. Come to church faithfully. Do work for God, Give generously and don't be surprised that six times the answer is "There is nothing." You see nothing. You pray again, six times, maybe 60 times, you pray up on the mountain, yet there is nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. So you send up your prayers that seventh time. That seventh time, on other side of nothing, there is something.

The first six trips that servant had to be wondering, Why in the world must I keep this up? Why must I keep climbing? Why do I keep on praying? Why do I keep looking? But many of you could stand up right now and encourage someone in a drought by telling them, Your seventh time will come. The clouds will gather, the rain will fall, and your drought will be over.

The Other Side of Nothing is a Promise Kept

The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you'" (v. 44).

So God promises, and then Elijah prays for the promise to be fulfilled. We connect the dots and see that God wills it to rain, and then God wills it to come to pass through Elijah's prayer. We get a picture in these verses that God's will is certain, but he delights to do his will through the prayers of his people. We have every reason to believe that Elijah knew what God would do, but he prayed anyway.

We have heard of insider trading; that is people buying and selling stock with information that no one else has. It's illegal. We have also heard of insider gambling, gambling on a game that is already fixed for a certain winner and loser. That is also illegal. So here is Elijah. He is practicing insider praying. It's not only legal; it's what prayer is supposed to be!

Isn't that what prayer is supposed to be? Insider prayer; reminding God of his promises. God gives us the promise: "I will give you rain." Then he gives Elijah an opportunity to pray the rain down. Do you see how God's mode of operation gives dignity to us and to our prayers? God gives us the dignity of free will to pray his promises and be part of his will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

But there is mystery right here in the story. Last week when we looked at Elijah's prayer the answer was immediate, and it was hot. This time we look at Elijah's prayer and it is an agonizing process—seven times, go back and look again, keep praying. God's answer was delayed and instead his answer was wet. Next week we will see that God actually refuses to answer Elijah's prayer altogether in chapter 19:4.

Sometimes prayer is effortless, sometimes it is agonizing, and who really knows why some answers to prayer come easy, and some answers come hard, and some answers don't come at all. It's a mystery. And if anyone tells you that they understand how, why and when God answers prayer, cover your ears because they don't know what they are talking about. But here is what we do know. We know that when we look out at the horizon and see nothing, it's time to pray. Because on the other side of nothing is a promise, 7,500 promises in the Bible actually, and soon to follow is a promise kept by a faithful God. The rain was coming. The promise kept meant life, water for soil, for livestock, for grain and grass and mud pies.

So God, the God of spectacular dramatic interventions who answered prayer by fire in verses 36-39, now answers Elijah's prayer with water. Fire to convert the heart and water to refresh and feed. This was a great reminder to me that we can trust God that droughts don't last. Elijah is telling Ahab, get ready. The rain's coming. God is going to unload his blessing just as he promised.

Meanwhile the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel (v. 45).

This is tough for me to talk about, but it shouldn't be. In the past two months I have seen God work in my family. Our house sold in Wisconsin in January. Julie and I are moving her and our stuff here at the end of March. She got a job finishing the school year out here teaching Kindergarten. My oldest daughter, who is graduating from college in Wisconsin this spring, just got accepted into Graduate School only 90 minutes from here. And each time I update someone around here, I learn that they have been praying. Even Friday in the parking lot I heard, "Oh we were just praying about that at our Community Group Wednesday night. I meant to ask you what was happening." Incredible things in this season of God opening doors.

This Side of Nothing is Sin and Despair; The Other Side of Nothing is Amazing Grace

The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel (v. 46).

This is an incredible picture. We form in our minds an image of what this looked like, and it must have looked strange. The knees that were bent in prayer are now running track. His feet are pounding ahead of Ahab's chariot for 17 miles. It was a supernatural feat. If God caused this to happen, there must be something God wants us to learn from this strange race.

Let's consider the offices that the two men held. Elijah was the prophet and Ahab with all his sin and rebellion was the king. God puts Elijah supernaturally in front of Ahab. If Elijah is out in front of Ahab, Ahab is following the prophet. I think that is significant. The king follows the prophet. The king following the Word of

the Lord. God's Word leading the way. God's Word showing the king the path to follow and he offers grace to a really bad dude.

What is going on here? God through Elijah is offering Ahab another opportunity, showing him the road to repentance, offering him the Word of God to guide his rule over Israel as king. Last night as I was thinking about this I wondered, "Are there people in our church who believe that their spiritual drought is all they will ever get because of all the bad things they have done in their lives? That God's grace is extended to others, but they are so bad they are not worthy?"

Do some of you just bristle up when we talk about grace at CPC? That you just don't see yourself as worthy of grace? Well, none of us is worthy of grace. That is the whole point of grace. Ahab isn't. I'm not. You're not. Even Elijah isn't. Every one of us here today are created in the image of God with extraordinary worth. A drought in your life may be God's grace. Because it was only in the drought that you are driven to your knees and cry out to God u-n-c-l-e.

Some of you may know the writings of the great Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was a writer and revolutionary during the days of the rule of communism in the Soviet Union. He wrote against the communist gulags and the concentration camps that were not unlike the Nazi prison camps. He saw these atrocities and spoke against them until he got caught and was sent into forced labor himself. He spent eight years in labor camps, and he recorded his experience in his three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*. He wrote honestly about who he was before he went into the camp: "I was an arrogant man. I was a self-righteous man... in the intoxication of youthful successes, I had felt myself to be infallible, and therefore I was cruel." But the darkness of this prison camp experience changed him and purged him of the false self out of which he was living. He was brought down to the ground, to a place of deep humility. When all was said and done, as he looked back on his time in the camp, he said, "So I turned back to the years of my imprisonment and say sometimes to the astonishment of those about me, 'Bless you, prison.' I have served enough time there. I have nourished my soul there. And I say without hesitation, 'Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.'"

It's extraordinary that someone could say that about such suffering. But this is precisely what we believe as Christians—that there is this furnace of transformation we go into in the midst of our grief, in the midst of our pain, in the midst of this darkness, and in this drought we're changed. Those of you who've been through drought and have come out on the other side know exactly what I'm talking about.

God in his grace has extended grace to you maybe six times. He got your attention. Now you see something. You make that seventh trip up to the mountain and see the grace of God, his love and mercy extended to you to lead you into a place of relationship with a God who loves you more than you can imagine.

We read about Elijah and we say, "Wow, he's in the big leagues. He's a giant, and I am a pigmy. He's in another spiritual world." Not true. Look again. "Elijah was a man... just like us." As any of us would have looked funny running ahead of a chariot, so he would have looked funny running ahead of a chariot as well.

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:16b-18). James didn't say, "Elijah was a mighty prophet of God." He didn't say Elijah was a "model no man can match." James says, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours." He got discouraged. He had some huge disappointments, he had faults, failures, and doubts. But he wasn't too powerful to pray or too confident to wait.

Isn't it thrilling that we can trust in the same God of Grace that he trusted? A God who allows us to discover and experience the other side of nothing? Life with a God who keeps his promises and shows us amazing grace?

Your Grace is enough.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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