

Laying Down (part 1)

1 Kings 19:4-8; John 6:35; 41-51

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“Elijah went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die. Then he lay down and fell asleep.” – 1 Kings 19:4-5

In 1995, a group of five childhood friends from Oxford, who would later be recognized by an intelligent minority as the greatest band of all time, released a music video for their hit song “Just”

Gavin Edwards best transcribes its movements in his blog, writing “In case you’ve never seen “Just” –from Radiohead’s excellent second album, *The Bends*—it’s got two components. The first is the band, looking misanthropic, giving it their all as they rock out in an apartment. The second is a narrative, filmed in grayish scale, featuring a well-dressed archetypal businessman who suddenly lies down in the middle of a city sidewalk, curled up as if he wants his blanket. Another man soon appears walking mindlessly along the same path and accidentally trips over him, and soon discovers that the man on the ground doesn’t want to get up, even after he is offered both sympathy and aid.

The man on the ground says that he’s not drunk or crazy, and that he just wants to be left alone and lie there. Despite the entreaties of a suddenly gathering crowd, the man on the ground simply won’t get up, and he denies that it’s due to cheap nihilism or fear of death. After their protests increase, the man finally reveals the reason why he’s lying down, but the editing of the video becomes purposely choppy so to prevent us the audience from effectively hearing or lip-reading what he says. The last shot is of the band gazing down from the apartment window, looking upon the crowd who are now all lying down next to the man on the ground, side by side, one by one, motionless, in silence.

The director, Jamie Thraves, has said, “To tell you [what the man said] would deaden the impact, and probably make you want to lie down in the road too.” And so 26 years later, it remains a mystery that has kept fans guessing and theorizing online as well as in pages of notes when searching for a decent analogy from which to begin a sermon.

When I first saw the video as a teenager my immediate thought was that it was a PSA to stay the heck away from a career in business and a 9-5 cubicle. No offense. But now, all these years later, the last and present being marked by a relentless pandemic, I think it could be thought of as a lot more simple and crude than that. That life is tiring and sometimes soul-crushing. And it’s not that it doesn’t matter, or any such apathetic nonsense as that -- because it does, and it can be enriched by the choices we do or don’t make -- it’s just that even so, life, especially here and now, is plain exhausting.

All the corrupt systems we have in place, all the bland routines we live out, all the hate and pain we witness and feel, it’s enough to make anyone, young or old, or even a prophet of the Lord Most High say, you know what, I’ve had enough. I throw in the towel. Just let me lie here in peace, wherever here is. Bed, pavement, or under a tree. Because I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t want to see it anymore. I don’t want to feel it anymore.

And it’s hard, my friends. It’s really hard. Especially when it’s you or a loved one who doesn’t want to get up and do and see and feel anymore.

My father's father was like that. He too lied down. Though with a bottle of pills by his bedside one night. But I didn't know that. Well, not at first. At first my Grandpa Dominick was just this loveable, old, bald, Italian guy who was great with his hands, and great with his love, either in his workshop or in the kitchen or anytime really with his family around. The feast of the seven fishes on Christmas Eve, man, I can still almost taste it. And downstairs in my office, I still have the intricate train set he carved for me out of mahogany. But one day, or so it seemed like a day (time and memory are tricky like that), he suddenly was no longer like Grandpa. No longer himself. Not to my father. Not to my poor grand-mother. Not to me or my brother or my mother. In an instant, or so it seemed, he was just sort of like done. Done with his hobbies, done his interests, done with everyone, really just done with life. He stopped working with his hands; he stopped working altogether. And all he seemingly had left in him was a passion for anger. And short-temper. And lots of confusion. Manic depressive, they called him. Sure, there were bursts of light, and fits of laughter here and there. But it was mostly just shades and shadows and lots of gray. And so one night, depressed and alone, or so he thought, he lied down and asked to die. And that he did.

It's rough, you know? It felt like there was nothing anyone could do to lift his spirits. Not a birthday party, not the appearance of his grand-kids, not even his favorite song by old Sinatra on the record player; hell, I used to think that an angel could have visited him right there in Union, New Jersey and cooked him a dinner straight from the halls of Heaven, and it wouldn't have made a blip of difference. At least that's what I used to think when processing it back then.

Do you all have a story like this? Do you know someone like that? A loved one who couldn't or still cannot emerge from the shade, and the shadow, and a background stuck in gray-scale? It sucks, doesn't it?

You know, I often think of our kids now. I mean I just spent a week with them down in Virginia, so it's only natural. I knew it before, but there for 18-waking hours a day, I could see and hear it just by listening to them, everything that they're up against. Now don't get me wrong, they had a great time. We had a great time. But we also had a lot of conversation. Open and transparent and real conversation. And by listening I heard, clearly, that it's just not the same anymore. Not the same as when I was their age, or especially when you were their age. Sure some of the social pressures are similar and they just go by different names now, but things are just simply categorically different. The technology, obviously. The mirror is in their hands always. The cost of college and the crushing debt that awaits them. The global awareness, thus, the endless global news dump that finds them. The threat of climate change. The chemicals in their food. The chemicals in their water. The chemicals in their clothing. Over-medication; over-subscription; over and double-over scheduled. Metal detectors at the doors; concerts and stadiums policed; politicians prioritizing party-lines and pocketable money rather than protections for the future and a shared sense of basic decency. So they are tired, my friends. Really tired. And not from talking late on the phone; or staying up playing video games past midnight; but from all this...this world we are indebting to them.

And I'm tired too, guys. I'm sad. I'm sad for them, and for what awaits them, but I'm also sad for us. For what's happening now and everything that lies ahead, what with Delta and Lambda and whatever they name the next one. I'm sad about the ugliness. The selfishness. The partisan hackery leading us to the cliff. The empty rooms. The empty store fronts. The lack of staffing. The lack of vacationing. I'm tired of the irrational hostility to expert opinion, and I'm angry over the brazen championing of ignorance and willful blindness to facts. I just can't get over that all the sacrifices

made for a year and a half appear now like they were just for naught. And so sometimes, to tell you the truth, I too just want to lie down. And go to sleep. And wake up when this is over. If it's ever over. Where's that broom tree?

See, I understand you now Elijah. I get you now. Before I only ever really thought of you as the dude up in the whirlwind I couldn't see, but down under this tree, I got you. He's just like us, he's just like me. Though admittedly, I never had a Jezebel hunting after me.

Elijah, you see, was stuck in a cycle he couldn't flee. A pandemic of sorts though perhaps of his own creation. He was no better than his ancestors, or so he said. And perhaps no better than the sum of his nightmares, or so I think. For if you remember, just a chapter earlier he had set out to stone all of Baal's prophets, to take their lives, but now, as God's only remaining prophet, he faced a bounty on his own head. The irony I think was too much for him. The reality of his circumstance and the consequences of his actions too grim. And so he lied down under that broom tree and asked God for release. If only there was a bottle or some pills around perhaps, rather than that strange cake that suddenly materialized about him.

Touched, he awoke, opened his eyes, and he ate that cake. But it wasn't enough. At least one time wasn't enough. And isn't that just how it goes? For our loved ones who are sad and depressed? There is no magic pill. No on/off button. The sustenance of a meal, the joys of old friends and habits, they aren't enough. At least at first. At first, they feel somehow colorless and uninspiring especially when compared to sleep and sleep-walking.

So Elijah just the same lies back down and he returns to sleep. But the angel you see, is persistent, and doesn't give up on him (important to remember, especially for part 2 next week) and so he tries again. Remaining by his side, the angel again stirs Elijah wake. And with soft words of encouragement he says, take and eat, or else your body will be too broken for the journey ahead of you.

Just pause and look at what God does *and doesn't do* here, my friends. Instead of critiquing Elijah; admonishing Elijah; emasculating Elijah; calling him lazy; faithless; or failing, God's angel stays with him, he remains by him, he feeds him, encourages him, and touches him; and that last point I think is so important! For if you've been in the hospital or by a bedside, that hand that holds yours is everything. It can be everything.

And for Elijah in particular, I think it was everything. For Elijah did most of his ministry alone. The people he counseled hardly listened to him, or worse yet, the people he counseled just wanted him dead and gone. And so he was often by himself for long and trying periods of time. With no one to talk to. With no one to hold him. But there, under that tree, when all hope was fleeting, he was reminded that he was never ever alone. For there, always, but especially in crisis, God was with him. Emmanuel. And without judgment or condemnation, but as a ministry of presence. A ministry of presence. That's we do here, at church, my friends.

And so it's just the same for us, here in this place. Or whenever we find ourselves down on the pavement. For the same person of whom it was asked: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" – this same person came down from Heaven so to know us and live amongst us. To weep like us. To feel angry and exhausted like us. To show us amazing grace; for this Jesus so loved us that he tasted mortality just to comfort us. To save us. From death, yes. But

from solitude and sadness too. To the sick, to the outcast, to the depressed grandpa and child, the Bread of Life comes and lies down with us. And for us. So that we don't have to do it alone. So that in the end we don't even have it to do it at all, for in Christ, it has already been done.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.