

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 28 & March 1, 2015
John Crosby
Hope Lost
1 Kings 17**

I believe. This was written on the walls of caves by Jews hiding during the holocaust. *I believe.* Almost as important were the words *even when* because when it's hard to believe *even when*, that's when we move to the land of hope. Hope or despair. Paul Tripp says, "The Bible is a story of hope. It is about hope misplaced and hope found. It's about hope that cannot deliver and hope that cannot fail. It's about where not to look for hope and the only place where true hope can be found." Without hope, it's hard to say *even when*.

I'm going to ask you to participate in something today. There are baskets at the ends of the pews containing cards and pens. Each person should pull out one of the cards and take a pen. There should be a card for every person. If not, the ushers can get more cards. I'd like us to do this together. While you're passing the baskets, I heard a story the other day of a vibrant 77-year-old grandma who was brought home from the hospital after hip surgery. She had had a wonderful recovery so far. Her daughter drops her off and she hobbles on her crutches. Realizing she hasn't eaten, she goes into the kitchen, but halfway there realizes she left her glasses back on the nightstand. She turns around and her crutch hits the doorframe. She tumbles down and *ouch!* Fifteen minutes later her daughter is taking her back to the hospital for what turns out to be a broken ankle. This is not a good day.

She gets out of the hospital late in the afternoon and comes home determined to get that bite of lunch. She gets into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator and realizes that tomorrow is trash day, so she takes her keys and little bundle of trash and determinedly hobbles down to the street where the big trash container is. She throws the trash in and she throws the keys right in with it, something we've all done. Well, she is short, and she looks in and sees the keys right there, so she leans in, and you know what is going to happen. She tumbles in. Her next door neighbor looks out and sees two legs sticking up from the trash container. He runs out, tips the trash can over and pulls her out. Her side is sore, so the neighbor gets her in his car and takes her back to the hospital and, sure enough, she cracked three ribs. In the hospital, they do two things. They give her pain medication that is supposed to knock her out, but somehow does not, and they say they will keep her there for observation—hospital code at that point for "Please, God, don't let her get out and break anything else."

They told that story at her funeral 26 years later. Her family smiled about that day, "Remember that day that seemed like the end of the road, but wasn't even close." We all have a *that day*. It happens to great and small, to young and old, to doubting people and faithful people. It happens to all of us. It even happens in the Bible to the famous people who are filled with faith, like Elijah. On the one side of your card is the story of Elijah in 1st Kings, chapter 19. In Old Testament days, Elijah was probably the most famous prophet that there was. The story is his *that day*.

¹Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

How he had killed 400 of evil Queen Jezebel's false prophets.

²So Jezebel sent 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 that of one of them." ³Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, 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."

⁵Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. ⁷The 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." ⁸So 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. ⁹There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹¹The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹⁵The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus . . ."

"I'll tell you who to bless and they will win the day."

¹⁸Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."

The Lord said to Elijah, "You are not alone." Elijah was having one of those days that we all have. The problem comes when *that day* follows another *that day* and another *that day* and another *that day* and then you're having a *that season*. Everybody can shrug off a bad day, but

a bad season leads to discouragement. Last week we said that discouragement precedes destruction. Nobody has ever come up to me and said, "John, I'm so encouraged about my marriage, I'm getting a divorce." Nobody ever comes up and says, "John, I'm so delighted with school, I'm dropping out." Nobody ever says, "John, I'm so encouraged about this church, I'm leaving the faith altogether." No teenager has ever said, "I'm so encouraged about my life, I'm going to start drinking and taking drugs." Every marriage that breaks up, every person who gives up, every company that goes belly up, they all have one thing in common. They have all faced discouragement, the loss of hope. The loss of courage devastates. In the absence of hope, discouragement rules the planet. I believe for many of you, discouragement rules your life, so I'd like to talk about seven of the Enemy's weapons of discouragement as we study hope. I'd ask you to take your pen and look at that passage on the card. I'd like to point out to you some of the ways that the Evil One uses weapons of discouragement that are enemies of hope.

1. The very first one is found in **verse 1, conflict or opposition**. Life is a battle. It seems like you are always in an argument. We always have something opposed to us and it is a never-ending idea that life is a battle that wears us down. You know you will have to go back to the fight at school or at home or at work tomorrow. We tire of the constant fighting.

¹Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

2. The second weapon of discouragement is found in **verse 2, evil in a broken world**. It says that evil claimed Jezebel. I believe we live in a broken world. The choir hymn today was set at a time when millions of people were being slaughtered for being Jews. Then evil Queen Jezebel said, "May the other gods kill me if I don't kill you."

²So Jezebel sent 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 that of one of them."

3. Evil sucks hope out of the room. I believe evil comes in all different kinds of shapes, but not everybody who comes against you is evil. There is a difference between conflict and evil. Please don't confuse those two, but when conflict and evil gather together and come against you, it's potent. What results leads to the third weapon the Evil One uses, fear. I believe it is **fear that pushes us to run. Look at verse 3.**

³Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

I'd circle *afraid* and *run* because I think they go together. Elijah wasn't running *for* his life, he was running *from* his life. He was running from his circumstances and he was not running to God. When you run from your fears, you lose hope. You lose strength. You lose perspective. We all run in fear. We don't face the things that shape our fear.

4. When you have evil and opposition that you are running away from in fear, what happens is **tiredness. Look at verse 7.**

⁷The 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."

When you are exhausted, your fears are big and your hope is small. When you are tired, everything seems like a major problem. Vince Lombardi said it well, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.”

5. For the fifth weapon of discouragement that I saw in this passage, I couldn't point to a specific verse, so right across the top of your card write **busy-ness**. The busy-ness of modern American life gives us no time to stop and let hope catch up to us. We are so busy. Elijah was so busy fighting and leading and arguing and running and praying every day, day after day, it seemed like a treadmill he couldn't get off. He felt like a rat on a wheel. Do you feel like Elijah sometimes? You're so busy you don't know how to stop?
6. When all those things come together, evil and opposition, running and fear, when you feel like you're so busy that you're constantly tired, you're right where Elijah was in **verse 10, Isolation, Messiah Complex**.

¹⁰. . . . I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

One of the weapons of the Evil One is to put us alone. By ourselves, the fire goes out. When we are isolated, we are vulnerable. And the other side of that, may I just tell you, when you are all alone, you tend to be very self-righteous. I'm the only one trying. Everyone else has given up. How come I'm the only one? That Messiah complex is not only very unattractive, it repels the people that you need to have around you.

7. All those things swirl around in different personalities in different ways and the end result is what I saw in **verse 11, feeling the absence of God**.

¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

What that means is that Elijah has no idea where God is in all this. He doesn't know if God is close or God is far away. All he knows is that he is in huge trouble and doesn't feel God near him. Do you ever feel like that? I do.

C. S. Lewis is one of my favorite theologians. He wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain*, trying to say, why would a good God let pain happen? And he wrote this famous quote. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” I love that. I think there is truth in it. Sometimes God has to get my attention, but you know what? That's what C. S. Lewis wrote when he was on top of the world.

Do you want to know what he felt like when his wife died? He wrote this. “When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. 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.” Even the great, Lewis, Elijah, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, all of them have experienced that sense of “God, where are you when I need you most?”

Let's take just a second here and look at that list on the card. Look it over and say, "Which of these weapons is the enemy using to take hope away from me most often or even today?" Do you feel alone with it? Are you so busy or exhausted? Some of us are circling all seven of those things. There is, I believe, something that is trying to rob you of hope and we see it best when somebody has the courage to share their story. How do we know Elijah lost hope? Because Elijah told somebody. But Elijah lived 2,600 years ago. It was a different world. What does it look like today to live with hope and without hope?

I asked a young couple if they would share some of their story with us and we sat down this last week. On Friday morning I got the raw video from our video guy and we talked for 45 minutes. I got the video down to 9 minutes, but I said we can't show 9 minutes. I took it to Starbucks and played it with my earphones and then I was like, "Whoa!" A friend of mine had just walked into Starbucks. I said, "Bad news, dude. Sit down here and watch this. Tell me what I can cut out. It's too long." He sits down and puts in my earphones and hits *play*. I go and get another cup of coffee. Nine minutes later I come back and ask, "What do I cut?" He turns to me and says, "John, you should cut your sermon. People need to hear this." I thought half of his advice was very good. Why don't we listen to this story together?

[Video shown. To view, see link below]

[John Crosby:] We're talking about seasons of hope and times when we feel hopeless. I think having known you guys a little bit over the years you've been here at CPC, I've seen you go through both. Why don't you share a little of your story?

[Matt Norman:] We've been married for 15 years and after being married for 3 years—so we were about 29 years old—we started what became a 10-year process of trying to build a family.

[Kari Norman:] It took over a year and a half to get pregnant with our first baby. We lost that baby early in the pregnancy due to a miscarriage. We didn't know it then, but that turned out to be the first of six miscarriages we experienced over the years. Then we were very blessed in 2007 to have twins. We have twin boys who are now 7-1/2. After they were born, we were hoping to have another child or two. In 2008 we got pregnant 3 times and lost all three of those babies, the first two for unknown reasons and then the third we found out was due to a chromosomal abnormality called Turner's Syndrome. We took a year off. We prayed and thought about whether we would give it one more shot and we decided to give it one more shot, just one more shot. We got pregnant and had another late stage miscarriage which happened to also be from the same chromosomal problem, Turner's Syndrome. The doctor said it was not a genetic thing that anyone carries. The chances of this happening twice to the same family were basically zero, so at that point we decided we were done.

[JC:] So you decide, after all this pain and uncertainty, that you're done trying and life continues to go on. So what happened next?

[KN:] Around that time we hit the bottom. We actually had to do a repeat D and C surgery for that final miscarriage. I came home after that surgery and Matt could just tell by the look on my face that I just was paralyzed with sadness, kind of in a way that I hadn't been before. He said, "Just go take a walk. Get out of here and go do what you need to do." So

I put my headphones on and just walked with no destination in mind. I wound up going down to Minnehaha Creek and just lying there on the creek bank. It was a cold spring day. I just lay there and wept. As I was lying there, out of nowhere, these birds started circling overhead. I was watching them, and I counted them, and I realized there was one bird for each of the babies we had lost. I just felt like God was in that and He was demonstrating His presence. I said, “Thank You, God. I know You’re here, but I don’t feel You. God, I’m mad, and I’m very, very sad, but if this is going to get any better, if my spiritual life and our marriage are going to come back, I don’t know what that’s going to look like, but I know You have a plan for me—just show me what it is.”

[JC:] Kari talked about that at least there was an act of identifying a time when God was calling her to respond to this differently. Matt, did you have one of those, or is it a more gradual thing? How did you sense His spirit in your life?

[MN:] I came to a realization that a lot of my failure to respond well came from my own insecurity. I just came face to face with the fact that I was distancing myself. I was angry because I was disappointed in myself. I was disappointed in my own insecurity. I was disappointed in my own fear. I was disappointed in my own lack of capacity to do this the way that I thought I should. There was a Mother’s Day, I don’t know what year it was, but historically I have not done well on gifts for important holidays like Mother’s Day and birthdays. I went to the Bead Monkey and bought birds that represented every one of the lost children and handmade this necklace with our twin boys—she’s wearing it now. For me that was an act of saying, “I’m sorry and I’m going to try to do this better.”

[KN:] After that time of surrender, I think that’s when the healing and hope started to come back. We did not have a hope for another child at all. Actually, Matt had been delaying scheduling a vasectomy for a while, and finally he had one scheduled for November 2013, and a week before that, I was feeling strange. I called Matt at work and said, “I took this pregnancy test and it was positive.” At first I was mad because I felt like, “Gosh, we’re at the end zone here. Are we going to have to go through this one more time?” But there was something in me that felt like “I think this one is different.” We went to the doctor and had an ultrasound appointment at the exact hour that Matt was supposed to have his vasectomy. It was Friday afternoon. We’re used to more bad news than good news in these meetings, so we were surprised when the doctor said everything looked good. I had a feeling that if God wants to do this, He was going to do this on His own. I said that to the doctor. Nine months later God gave us the gift of a baby girl which was beyond anything we had expected or imagined or hoped for. Not only did He give us the gift of this baby, but He gave us the gift of experiencing Him in a very real way.

[MN:] Last night I was holding Baby Mae as I was trying to get her to fall asleep. She was touching my face and I just stared at her eyes and I was thinking, “God, this is unbelievable, you know? The whole journey was worth it, you know?” And not everyone gets that—not everyone gets the baby. For some people, the answer is *no* the whole time, but God finds a way ultimately to grow us and then to give us just what we need.

[KN:] It was like God got us to a point where, even if He would not give us this thing, we’re content with what You have for us. We’re willing to go on with the adventure You have in store. And you know, we shouldn’t spin the awful things and say they are great—

they're not—they're just awful, but God can take an awful thing and attach a beautiful thing to it. I feel like He has done that in so many ways.

[Video ends.]

They were here last night, and they look just like you. They look just like us. We all look like life is under control, going in the right direction. We all seem to have our acts together unless we're brave, unless we let our shields down and talk about the hard parts of the journey with despair and hope.

We are going to spend the next four weeks talking about God's path out of discouragement, finding the roots of hope, but I want, just for a minute, to talk about what God's answer to Elijah was, what his answer to the Normans is, what His answer to you might be. Why don't you flip over that card and just see if you don't see some of these same things in the story about Elijah?

- **God begins before speaking**

For me it starts with the idea that God starts before He speaks. There is a time when we stop in our frenetic trying to fix everything or in our despair. We just stop. For Elijah, it's out in a cave. For Kari, it was a walk where she lies down on the bank by Minnehaha Creek. God is already there.

- **God is not offended**

I was struck by the idea that God is not offended when we yell at Him. God is not offended by Elijah when he whines. God is not angry when Kari or Matt are angry. God is like that parent who really wants to know how the day has been, not so that you get it out of your system, but so there is one person you can tell the absolute truth to. When Kari and Matt poured their hearts out, angry and confused, they found God to be safe.

- **God opens the eyes of our hearts**

I think the third thing that struck me is that eventually if people want to see God, God opens their eyes to see God passing by. Elijah sees that He is not in the fire, the earthquake, or the storm, or the whisper. Kari lying on the bank sees live birds that open the eyes of her broken heart. Matt sits down and realizes how much he's mucked up and how God is still there.

- **God doesn't often explain**

The next thing I think I saw is counterintuitive. God does not explain. I want to know the answer, but God is not interested in giving me the answer. God very rarely explains why this is going on. "Kari, on September 7, I did this, so that on March 15, three years later, you would do that." That is not the way God works. God doesn't often explain. Instead, God offers enough strength to do what's next, just enough strength to do what's next. Elijah is given the strength to go back. On that bank, Kari is told to forgive Matt. Matt is told, "Make a better gift for your wife this year." And hope comes. It's interesting that God asked Elijah the same thing twice. He said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah is

still bummed out even after being in the presence of God. We keep falling, but God keeps showing up, and then hope starts to breathe when we move. Hope starts to breathe when we trust God just enough for one step.

- **God offers company**

I guess for me, the last thing I got out of the story of Elijah is that Elijah never *was* alone. He just felt alone. God says, “And, Elijah, I’ve got 7,000 other people just like you. If you’d open your eyes, you could see them. You are not alone.” I’d say that’s you, too. You’re not alone. Look around. Somebody would be glad to talk with you. They usually have pain in their eyes, too.

What I’d like to do for just a second is to ask you, whether you look at the card or just close your eyes, where is your sense of discouragement strongest and what might be one way that hope wants in? You could write that down if you want, but even if you don’t, make this be God’s time in silence with you.

Link to video shown during this service: <https://vimeo.com/121044173>
(Kari and Matt Norman’s story)

A postscript from John Crosby:

“I’m encouraging our congregation to get and read [The Hope Quotient](#) by Ray Johnston (available in our bookstore). The overarching theme of the series and many of the illustrations are found in there; solo deo Gloria!”