

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

Have you seen those tv commercials where the attorneys invite you to call them if you are in financial distress? Did you know that over 65% of Americans say that their finances are causing them stress? It's like walking on a treadmill when you get financially burdened. A treadmill gives you plenty of steps but takes you nowhere; paying the minimum on your credit card bill does pretty much the same thing. If you've ever been in this situation, you know it feels like an endless trap, trying to make higher payments when your budget only stretches so far, hustling to make more money and getting nowhere.

Many people are living just to make ends meet. Instead of living in a way that allows them to enjoy life they are looking for ways to numb, to make their present situation tolerable by trying to escape. It's not just financial worries that cause unhealthy stress; loneliness, not being able to do what you once could do, not having a say in what you do, facing discrimination or being harassed, a life change, grief, and unrealistic expectations are all causes of excess stress. And excess stress leads to headache, fatigue, upset stomach, the inability to sleep or concentrate, and if not treated it could lead to depression, ulcers, heart disease, arthritis or asthma flare ups. How do we find the strength to cope with everything that is going on in our lives? Where do we find the strength, the energy, to do more than simply exist? It's difficult to be strong or energetic when we have so much negative stress in our lives that we feel aimless, without meaning. We need meaning in our lives. A guide can help with that! A guide can help us to find meaning in our lives. The best guide is of course God.

However, there are times when we need to speak to a counselor, someone who will listen and help us to discover ideas to improve our daily life. You may think sharing your innermost thoughts with another person is not something you want to do, but it shows incredible strength when you have decided that a counselor is needed.

Another thing you can do is to just be kind to yourself, we are often our own worst critics. Being kind to yourself entails speaking to yourself in a kind tone, understanding that everyone experiences pain of some kind, knowing it is ok to have emotions, and setting realistic expectations for yourself. Pay attention to what you value. Savor physical senses like good smells and soft material.

If you're feeling extremely scattered notice where your feet are... If you are reclining sit up and put both feet on the floor. Notice how they are planted to the ground and that the floor supports you. Bring your attention back to the current moment and try to anchor yourself to the present. Taking your mind off your thoughts might help you feel more clearheaded and settled.

Prayer, just sitting in conversation with God, telling God your circumstances and just sitting in silence for a few minutes can be helpful.

Hug yourself. Physical affection and care are grounding, affirming, and loving. Even if you are alone, you can still feel these things by hugging yourself or patting your own arm. These physical gestures are proven to reduce naturally occurring stress or cortisol levels.

Notice what you are grateful for. Actively taking time to be grateful brings more joy to your life and can help take your mind off of your negative thoughts. Gratitude can happen even in the smallest of moments — a hot cup of coffee, a particularly bright morning, or something else that brings you joy. One of the treatments for mild depression is to keep a gratitude journal by each day writing down three things that you are grateful for.

Our gospel lesson today gives some guidance about where and how to find the strength we need to go on with life, how to find the kind of intimate fellowship with God in

Christ to make it through. Jesus had been in dialogue with a group of people about his ministry. Jesus said that he is the bread of life and that whoever comes to and believes in him will never hunger and thirst. We heard these words last week as we learned that Jesus' presence in the celebration of Holy Communion stays with us as we go through life.

Hearing that Jesus is the bread of life was too much for some of the people who were listening to him, claiming he was being preposterous because they knew his father and mother. They couldn't believe Jesus can be as special as he claimed to be. Jesus didn't let that stop him, he went on to say that everything God taught and did points to himself, and that he was in direct contact with God. He then reemphasized that he is the bread of life, the living bread that gives eternal life.

What does it mean to identify Jesus as the bread of life? Like wearing a coat in an Erie winter storm, essential. We need to have Jesus in our lives. When Jesus says he is the bread of life he is saying another way that he is the centerpiece of our spirituality, without whom our faith starves, and we would have little strength and energy to really live. Bread gives energy and strength to live life with patience and meaning. Just as the bread we eat stays with us, Jesus is a part of us. We are united in the grace of Christ.

Knowing this helps us to get through daily life. If God is with us in our daily activities, they must have a purpose. They must matter. Because if Jesus and the Father accompany us throughout our day, we and what ever we do must matter to the Lord! We get the power and energy to go on from Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther said that "When God draws us, he is not like a hangman who drags a thief up the ladder to the gallows; but he allures and coaxes us in a friendly fashion, as a kind man attracts people by his amiability and cordiality, and everyone willingly goes to him" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 23, p 83). Luther also said "Therefore, a Christian life is a life of bliss and joy. Christ's yoke is easy and sweet..." (*Complete Sermons*, Vol. 2/1, p. 402). The Holy Spirit stands by to keep us from stumbling and remaining in error.

If we look at Elijah from the first reading, we see that he was exhausted. He found a single tree in the wilderness and sat under it and asked to die. Elijah had been through a lot, and the results weren't what he had expected. Elijah had proven God's superiority to the pagan god Baal by igniting not only the wood on the stone altar he had built, but also completely eliminating the altar itself because the fire God sent was so hot. At least 700 prophets of Baal died that day and when Elijah ran down the mountain, expecting his victory to extend to the king and queen who worshipped Baal. That wasn't the outcome, and Elijah's very life was threatened, so he ran away. Instead of praising God's power, and awaiting God's further message, Elijah ran away and collapsed. But God did not desert him. God allowed him to sleep and then gave him sustenance. Elijah ate and drank and napped again, and the angel returned, urging him to have more to eat so he would be sustained for his journey.

Just as God gave Elijah what he needed to make a 40 day trek to Mt. Horeb, God gives us what we need to make it through everyday life. Even when we are stressed to the max God has way to recenter us and restore a sense of calmness and purpose to our lives.

All glory be to God.