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# PERSONAL RETREAT

As we come to the end of 2020, we find ourselves amid the wilderness. Far from home, the comforting confines of "normal" no longer in our purview. Navigating through these past twelve months has left us exhausted, isolated, hurting, and disconcerted. The collective groan of humanity mimics that of the prophet Elijah:

*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 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." Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.*

*1 Kings 19:3-5*

Running for his life, exiled to the wilderness, Elijah utters words we've all undoubtedly said at some point this year, "I've had enough, Lord!" Finding ourselves at the end of our rope, many of us are hanging on by a thread. To not address the validity of these emotions would be disingenuous and insincere. God isn't afraid of our angst and anxiety. Neither is He shocked by our fear and dismay. It's quite the opposite - God welcomes them. Like a concerned father, He invites us to bring Him our questions and concerns.

Take a moment to let these verses wash over you. Reread them, sit with them in silence, meditate on their truths, circle words or phrases that speak to you.

*Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*

*Hebrews 4:16*

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

*Matthew 11:28-30*

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 4:6-7*

Put those words into action by being vulnerable enough to have a conversation with God about the host of emotions that consume you - the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Here are a few questions to get the dialogue started:

- Complete the following sentence: 2020 was \_\_\_\_\_. What makes you answer this way?
- What is the dominant negative emotion you risk bringing with you into the New Year? How have you fed this emotion and allowed it to flourish over the past year?
- What did you face over the past year that caused you to question God's goodness, faithfulness, or timing? How did that, as well as your response to it, impact your relationship with God?
- Are there places within you where discontentment exists? What is fueling this tension?

Don't try to come up with the "right answer" or verbalize what you think God "wants you to say." Be transparent and open about the toll this past year has taken on your heart and soul. Whether that's speaking it out loud in prayer or putting your concerns down on paper, it's up to you. Just don't bypass this step. Come back to the personal retreat when you're ready.

We hope that exercise was a cathartic experience for you - one where you felt God's presence and comfort. Our prayer is that you felt the weight of the world lifted off your shoulders and placed on the One who holds the world in the palm of His hands. Overwhelmed and disheartened, life can feel as if darkness surrounds us. Yet this same ground, this darkness of night, is where faith finds its real strength. It's in our darkest moments where His light has the potential to shine the brightest, but it requires us to remain in Him. He illuminates our path enough for us to trust and take our next step. We demonstrate hope when we continue in faith. Displaying spiritual endurance is possible when we possess a relentless trust that God uses everything, even the darkness, for our good. We give our struggles the proper weight for the sake of what's to come. Hope is what sustains this process and provides us the strength to not give in or give up. Hope looks like patience.

Now, let's return to the story of Elijah. Just like God met you, He came to Elijah in the time of his greatest need. While Elijah was fast asleep, weary from his troubles, God sent an angel to his side:

*All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He 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. 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.*

*1 Kings 19:5-8*

Did you catch what took place? In the wilderness, God provided Elijah with a sustaining meal. He strengthened and took care of Elijah despite the grim surroundings. If we indeed believe God uses EVERYTHING for our good, it means that no matter how difficult or challenging this past year has been, God was in it. Not only was He in it, but He provided for you all along the way. Provision fuels preparation. We can't take this for granted, but we will if we don't slow down, reflect, and articulate our gratitude for His faithfulness. Every morning we experience an encounter with God's grace and care.

The angel encouraged Elijah to eat, drink, and rest not so his belly would be full, and he could go on his merry way, but to sustain Elijah for what lay ahead. Elijah didn't possess the capacity to change his circumstances. The task before him was too daunting. In the word of the angel, "the journey is too much for you." The same holds for us. Asserting sure willpower to get us through the year ahead will surely leave us worn-out. Rather than a breakthrough, we will experience an inevitable breakdown. But, by recognizing and relying on God's presence in our lives, we can encounter any circumstance with confidence, boldness, and faith.

Take a moment to let these verses wash over you. Reread them, sit with them in silence, meditate on their truths, circle words or phrases that speak to you.

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*Lamentations 3:22-23*

*And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

*2 Corinthians 9:8*

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.*

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who[i] have been called according to his purpose.*

*Romans 8:28*

*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*

*Philippians 4:12-13*

Get out your journal and spend some time considering the following reflection questions:

- How would you describe God's faithfulness to you during this challenging season?
- In what ways has God blessed you over the past year and provided for your needs?
- Where did God show up for you in 2020?
- How did you experience God's strength amid your weakness?
- Where are you relying on your strength to change your circumstances?  
What would it look like to give up control and trust in this situation?

Afterward, write out a prayer of gratitude for God's faithfulness and provision, declaring your dependency in Him.

For us to begin a new chapter of faith and courage, we need to confront the old stories we continue to tell ourselves. Without even knowing it, we get caught in endless loops of frustration and futility. We wander down paths we didn't intend, or we trek down well-worn roads that feel comfortable, even if they're leading us in the wrong direction. On every occasion, God shows up and asks a question: "Why are you here?" God does this not to pile on more guilt and shame or make us feel less than. God inquires to expose our hearts so He can deal with the issue at hand. For God to lay down the path out of the wilderness or bring water to our wasteland, it requires us first to confront our surroundings. God posed this question to Elijah when he was alone, far from home in a cave. Elijah's response is very telling.

*There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He 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." The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."*

### **1 Kings 19:9-11**

What we believe about our current place determines our way into the future. If we think where we are is because of our choices, we'll punish ourselves or try to earn our way forward. On the other hand, if we believe God led us into the wilderness because of our circumstances, we may end up blaming Him or others. Either way, we lose hope, faith, purpose, and direction - the very things that sustain us. "Why are you here?" can be a frightening question, but it also has the power to liberate and free us. The very act of verbalizing our thoughts shrinks the wilderness's boundaries and places us one step closer to new hope and a new way.

Get out your journal and spend some time considering the following reflection questions:

- If God were to ask you, "Why are you here?" what would your response be?
- How would you describe the place you find yourself in currently? Why are you residing in this place, and what brought you here?
- What unaddressed issues exist, and how are they influencing your heart?
- What destructive stories do you continue to tell yourself, and how are these stories preventing you from moving forward?

Afterward, write out a prayer declaring your trust in God's grace.

What voice are you allowing to speak into your soul? Who has your ear when life's inevitable disappointment appears on your doorstep? The more we try to silence our doubts, insecurities, and questions, the louder they become. No matter the amount of self-effort and will-power we exhibit, they will make their presence known. They might quiet down for a time, but eventually, they find their voice again. God recognized this and didn't want to leave Elijah in a vulnerable place. So, He made His presence known, but not in the way many would expect.

*The 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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When 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?"*

### **1 Kings 19:11-13**

The enemy might shout, but the Holy Spirit speaks truth to us in a whisper. God often speaks in a "still small voice" to direct us, challenge us, and encourage us in His path for our lives. You don't whisper when someone is a thousand miles away; you yell. God whispers to us because He is close. He doesn't need to talk any louder. His comforting presence is the promise He keeps. The One who is powerful enough to hush the wind and the waves stills our spirit. By slowing down and tuning our ears to His voice, we can finally experience some much-needed rest.

Take a moment to let these verses wash over you. Reread them, sit with them in silence, meditate on their truths, circle words or phrases that speak to you.

*I have set the Lord continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

*Psalm 16:8*

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

*Psalm 34:18*

*But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.*

*Psalm 73:28*

*God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*

*Acts 17:27*

Get out your journal and spend some time considering the following reflection questions:

- Where is God quietly trying to get your attention? How can you tune your ears and focus your mind on getting the message?
- What truth do you need to keep before you to silence the enemy's voice?
- What makes God's presence your good?

*Afterward, write out a prayer thanking God for His presence in your life.*

Obstacles are opportunities in disguise. Our setbacks can set us up for a transformation we couldn't imagine on our own. But, we only get to experience this if we're willing to ask a better question. We can't stop at "Why, God?" A question like that leaves us stuck in the past, a place that can't be changed or fixed. Instead, we need to turn around and look towards the future by asking, "What now, Lord?" By seeking out this answer, we learn what our next step is out of the wilderness and into the future God has for us.

Our influence always gets formed within and then moves outward. These ripple effects of obedience and faith touch those around us. Our expression, the way we display our faith and live our lives, can be someone else's encounter. We see this in Elijah's story. God gave him the task of anointing the king of Israel and ushering in Elisha as his predecessor.

Influence has a responsibility for those within its care. We must start with love because love compels and love fills. Love wants the best for another person. Purpose resides in giving ourselves away. A surprise twist comes at the end of our efforts to impact others and affect change in their lives. God uses our obedience in caring and serving others to breathe life into our souls by stretching us and molding us into His image. In those thousand little things, God's heart becomes reflected in our own.

Get out your journal and spend some time considering the following reflection questions:

- Where do you need to move from "Why, God?" to asking, "What now, Lord?"
- What are some things you sense God stirring within your heart? What do you believe your next step of faith is, and what would it look like to take it?
- In what relationships do you have influence? Are you stewarding that influence well? Why or why not?
- Your purpose always lies outside of yourself. What opportunities have presented themselves to invest in the lives of others?

It's human nature to head towards the path of predictability and routine. We crave security, the ability to control our circumstances, and manage life on our own. Without a disruption, we drift aimlessly in the direction we've always gone. Over the past year, God did work inside our hearts as we responded to the circumstances we faced. While we'd rather settle for the "old days," He wants to do something new within us. Our best doesn't remain in the past; it resides in the present with an eye to the future. We must draw a line in the sand to declare the past will remain where it belongs - in the past. Consider Elisha's response to the news Elijah brought him.

*So Elisha returned to his oxen and slaughtered them. He used the wood from the plow to build a fire to roast their flesh. He passed around the meat to the townspeople, and they all ate. Then he went with Elijah as his assistant.*

*1 Kings 19:19-21*

Through his actions, Elisha proclaimed there was no turning back. After kissing his family goodbye, Elisha killed his oxen and burned his plows - a scorched-earth display of faith, declaring that his time as a wealthy farmer was over. He was going to serve the Lord. The meal wasn't a feast for friends but an offering of faith and trust to the Lord. We all have plows that need to burn. To keep them in the field gives us an out if things in the future get tough, uncomfortable, or challenging. When our character gets shaped, and our faith gets tested, we will yearn for a routine life in the field. The plow might not be what we want, but it's what we know. Rather than thrive, we will settle. When we carve out our future through a life centered on faith, trust, and obedience, we step in to influence and impact.

Take a moment to let these verses wash over you. Reread them, sit with them in silence, meditate on their truths, circle words or phrases that speak to you.

*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

*Isaiah 43:19*

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

*Colossians 3:15-17*

*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

**Philippians 3:12-14**

Get out your journal and spend some time considering the following reflection questions:

- What theme(s) have emerged from your time in reflection with God today?
- How would you describe the "new thing" God is doing inside your heart?  
If you can't sense a new thing occurring, why do you believe your faith remains neutral?
- What plows of the past do you need to burn to allow this new thing to flourish?  
Why are you reluctant to do so?
- What opportunities lie ahead that are awaiting your obedience?

A simple way to make a declaration of faith for the upcoming year involves reflecting on the person you want to become in 2021. A tool we utilize at Port City for spiritual formation is My One Word. When you choose a single word, you gain clarity and focus. You are moving toward the future rather than swearing off the past. We want to help you start down the path towards picking a word for 2021 or articulate the word you've already chosen for the New Year. Reflect and journal on the following questions:

**AS YOU PREPARE TO PICK YOUR WORD FOR 2021...**

- What type of person do you want to become in 2021?
- What are some characteristics or qualities that define the person you want to become?
- What are some potential words you are considering? Why have these words resonated with you?
- To help refine your search, examine a few Scriptures that speak of virtues that have the potential to become your One Word: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, Colossians 3:12-17, 1 Peter 4:7-11, Galatians 5:22-23.

**FOR THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY PICKED A WORD FOR 2021...**

- My word for 2021 is \_\_\_\_\_. What led you to choose this word?
- What do you hope will happen in 2021 with your One Word? What affect do you hope your word will have on your character?
- What is one action you can take to start the year off strong with your One Word?
- Look up and write out two verses that speak to your One Word.

We hope this personal retreat was a rewarding experience for you and that God spoke to your heart today. Congratulations on finishing well so you can start 2021 strong. Just like you, we are excited to see how God will move in your life over the next 365 days. Even though the future is unknown, you can trust in the consistency of God's character and the fact that His love remains the same yesterday, today and forever.

One final question: The future. What emotions, thoughts, and feelings are stirred within you when you hear those two words? How does your response to this question influence your actions in the present? How can you declare your trust in God's faithfulness for 2021?

Close your retreat by writing out a prayer to God. Express your hopes and dreams for the year to come, but be willing to lay down 2021 at His feet and let His will be done. Ask that He bring you into deeper intimacy with Him. Commit to being an instrument for forgiveness, grace, and hope in this hurting and lost world. Ask that God use your life to point others towards the life-changing hope only the Gospel provides.

