As most of you are aware we have been having something of a Covid related disruption in our lives for the past year and a half or so. You might even remember that the diocese would not allow us to have church for about a year. In that time, we created a new model for doing church in which the clergy were paid to not conduct worship services, Sunday School or visit parishioners in the hospital – it was a good time. And I don’t want to relitigate whether or not this was the right decision but rather bring this up to explain a weird thing that I have noticed as we have emerged somewhat from the pandemic and are getting somewhat back to normal. What I have noticed has to do with what clergy are saying about what they have been through and what they need to recover. And interestingly this phenomenon started pretty early on the pandemic and continues to this day. What I have noticed is that clergy having been telling themselves that during the time of Covid we worked harder, were filled with more angst and suffered more trauma than anyone ever had to endure in the history of clergy-ness. There were stories of clergy burnout, clergy exhaustion, talk of individuals leaving the ministry and a somewhat fanatical emphasis on clergy wellbeing. I sat in on a clergy call and the facilitator said, “if you hear nothing else today, hear that, take your days off, take your study leave and your vacations, take care of yourself.” Conditions for clergy during the time of lockdown were described in terms usually reserved for people who have gone through something as traumatic as scaling the cliffs at Point du Hoc, enduring a gas attack on the Somme or sitting through a George Clooney film festival. Now if some of you are getting worried let me tell you that this was not my experience. I don’t need you to buy me a chateau in the Swiss Alps where I can go and convalesce (unless you really want to). I am slightly baffled by the whole thing. I know things were different but most of the things that were different involved less work not more. Unless we subscribe to what The Offspring told us when they sang, “I guess it ain't easy doing nothing at all.”

I don’t know what is the cause of this belief that we are like the one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest but I think our lesson from 1st Kings might be the antidote. It concerns the prophet Elijah and comes after he has been on something of a roll. He has performed miracles, raised the dead and called down fire from heaven. But at the end of all this we find him today in something of a slump. He sits down by a broom tree and says, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” What brings on this existential crisis we are not told but it might be the result of a hectic schedule in which case it is kind of the opposite of what I have experienced among clergy in our current state. Elijah is burnt out because he has done so much, not so little. But regardless of what has brought on his ennui he finds himself in a place where many clergy seem to find themselves these days, if what I hear is to be believed. He is at the end of his rope. And so what does God do? Does he tell him to go on vacation or to join a support group? No, rather he sort of tells him to quit whining and get on with things. The angel makes the message a little nicer saying, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Elijah gets no vote on whether he wants to go on the journey but simply told to go. And I think that may be what the Church needs to hear as we wind down from this pandemic – we need to go. We need to go do the will of God.

I don’t say this to make anyone feel bad because we will all have times where we are like Elijah today where we give up on the call God has placed on our lives because we are just not feeling it. Elijah was one of the greatest of all prophets yet even he was able to deceive himself. Even he was able to say that he was unable to go on. The great Elijah decided that he had figured out a better plan than the one God had in store for him, even though his great plan was to lay down and die. Elijah convinced himself that this is the only possible solution but then God intervenes and shows that there is another way to go. And the wonderful part of the story and the part we need to heed is the fact that Elijah listens. He does not tell the angel to go away because he has two weeks scheduled at Rancho Relax-o rather he does as he is told. Now before I go on, I want to say that there are certainly times where God does call us to rest. There are many instances in the Gospels Jesus and the disciples go away from the crowds so they can do just that. But like we hear in the Book of Eclesiastes, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” And it would seem to me that after a time where so little has occurred it is time in the church to get up and move.

Much of my frustration in this time of pandemic has come because I feel like we as clergy have not lived up to our end of the bargain. We have not worked so hard that we need to spend a month at club med. What we have done is lock ourselves away in our little livestreaming redoubts and claimed that we never worked harder. We have substituted virtual interaction for real interaction and claimed that it was all the same. We have made an incarnational faith into a TV show. We have missed funerals, avoided being with the dying, ignored those who are shut in and then proudly announced that this neglect was really love. Now that this pandemic is winding down, we seem to want to keep the neglect going by claiming that our spirit is weary and that we need refreshment for our souls. Clergy are telling ourselves and others that we need to take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry because we have worked just so gosh darn hard. And I am disappointed in my profession. I am disappointed how when the world needed the church we laid down like Elijah and prepared to die. And so, I guess in all of this I just want to say thank you. Over the past year and a half, the church has acted in ways we would have never tolerated in our local Arby’s and yet you hung on. What all of this tells me is that the church is greater than its parts because the leadership and the self-indulgent smugness that has come from church leadership should have discouraged even the heartiest of Christian. God must have strengthened the laity because they certainly were not getting much from the clergy.

And so I don’t think that it is time for a victory nap but rather we, especially clergy need to heed the words of the angel to Elijah to “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” We are beginning the journey back from a very dark and sad time in the life of the church. A time where doors were closed and sacraments refused. We have had our rest and do not need a rest from our rest. It is now the time to go on the journey that God has planned for us. It is the time to feed on the sustenance that God has provided so that we may go out into the world, building God’s kingdom this day and forevermore.