

- Let's pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, amen. Just a moment ago, our presiding minister Richard Hayes invited each of you to stand and to read a portion of Psalm 42. I wonder how many of you remember the words that you read? My soul thirst for God, for the living God. My tears have been my food day and night. While people say to me continually, where is your God? My soul is cast down within me. I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Now I'm realistic enough to know that most of what is read in church washes over you and me like warm bath water. The words are generally comforting to us in their familiarity. The hymns are satisfying for their musical appeal. And the faces around the chapel are beaming with confidence that everything really is going to be okay, at least for this one hour. But every now and then, we think about what we've just said, and we start to get a little nervous. Who are we to speak in such a casual way to the maker of heaven and earth, the Alpha and the Omega, the Ancient of Days? My God, why have you forgotten me? I'm reminded of an image first penned by Annie Dillard in her book, *Holy the Firm* and since quoted by preachers in many pulpits, including this one. And she writes, the higher Christian churches, and by that I think she means churches a lot like us, come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing. As though people in themselves were inappropriate set of creatures to be and to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without they're getting killed. Based on Annie Dillard's words, perhaps wearing crash helmets to church would be the most appropriate attire as we dare to approach the throne of the Almighty. We say all the right words, but so often do so without thinking about what we are saying. And certainly without knowing how God will choose to respond to us when we say them. If this happened to be your day, for really listening to the Psalmist's words, for feeling them right down in the marrow of your bones. This warning probably doesn't apply to you. If tears have been your food both day and night. You didn't have any trouble connecting with this psalm because you've been there. You have your own story, or you know someone else's story well, that tells what it's like to feel completely alone in the world, to be forgotten, afraid, swallowed up by the darkness, angry with God. I'm sorry even to have to remind you of these feelings when you may have simply been trying to get away from them on a pleasant summer morning here at Duke Chapel. The problem is you can't really get away from these things in church. Not if you're gonna read the Bible, and think about what those people went through. Take Elijah as a good example. You heard about him in 1 Kings 19. He went from being most successful prophet to most wanted man, in a matter of minutes. In fact, the words of this psalm could have come straight out of Elijah's mouth. My God, why have you forgotten me? We meet him in this story at the conclusion of a contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Why was he in a contest with the prophets of Baal? Well, there was a drought at the time, a terrible drought. And the people were conflicted about which deity, Yahweh or the Canaanite God Baal, just might be able to send them some rain. The purpose of this contest was to discover whether Yahweh or Baal could miraculously bring down the fire that would burn the sacrificial offering, and the winner would surely be the one who could end this terrible drought. The prophets of Baal went first with Ahab, King of Israel, and all the Israelites as witnesses. These prophets danced around the altar and they shouted instructions to the sky

with Elijah standing back and mocking them all the while. Maybe Baal is meditating or taking a nap, or maybe he wandered away, which means in Hebrew, he was attending to natural needs. But all of this was to no avail. There was no fire forthcoming from Baal. Now, when it was Elijah's turn, he repaired the altar, and he doused the wood with water three times, enough even to fill this trench that he had dug around the altar. Then he prayed for the Lord to reveal His power, which he did, by sending a fire so hot that it consumed the whole thing, the wood, the offering, even the fire that was in the trench. The people were duly impressed and they declared Yahweh to be the winner, and Elijah declared the profits of Baal to be the losers by killing all 450 of them. The final scene of this encounter describes Elijah telling King Ahab, his old nemesis, you better get that chariot off the mountain because there's a storm coming. And as the rain began to pour, Elijah surged ahead of Ahab's chariot on foot, and ran the entire 17 miles back to Jezreel, flaunting his victory every inch of the way. It was only when Ahab got home to describe these events to Queen Jezebel, his wife, that things took a sharp downhill turn for Elijah. You see, Jezebel had been the biggest supporter of these prophets of Baal that Elijah had just murdered. As the daughter of a Phoenician King, who was also a priest in one of the cults of Baal, she was used to getting her own way. And she was not about to take this kind of behavior from Elijah lying down. She probably sent the message to Elijah, that within 24 hours, she would do the same thing to him, he had done to the prophets of Baal. With this news, Elijah plummeted from the heights of glory to the depths of despair, he was terrified by Jezebel's threats. He tried to get as far away from her as he possibly could, and ran away to the middle of the wilderness, where he found himself sitting underneath a solitary broom tree. He begged God to let him die on the spot. According to Elijah's own words, he was feeling that the example of his ancestors, such as Moses, was so far beyond his own, that he could never match their standard. And now he just wanted to end it. But the Lord had other things in mind. After God sent food and water to the beleaguered prophet via an angel, Elijah embarked on a very long journey for 40 days and 40 nights to mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, the place where Moses had received the law. Not only was it a very long journey, but Elijah fasted all the way. And when he arrived there, Yahweh was waiting for him. The Lord asked, what are you doing here, Elijah? He answered that he had been very zealous for the Lord, but the Israelites had forsaken the covenant. And now he was the only faithful one left and a hunted man at that. If Elijah was looking for sympathy, he wasn't going to get it here. Yahweh simply instructed him to stand on the mountain and wait for the Lord would pass by. So he did. First there came a great wind strong enough to split the mountains all around Elijah into a million pieces. But the Lord was not in the wind. Then there came a great earthquake so powerful that it seemed as if the foundations of the whole world were trembling, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And then there came a great fire so hot that no one could stand anywhere near it. But the Lord was not in the fire. What was Elijah supposed to make of this, were this supposed to be the signs that traditionally told that Yahweh was near? Remember Moses and the burning bush on this same mountain, even Elijah himself had prayed for rain and a miraculous fire on Mount Carmel, on Mount Carmel, and the Lord had delivered. But now, as he listened, and he waited, the only thing left to do was to grow more terrified. Finally, there came a still small voice, translated variously as a thin whisper, or a faint murmuring sound, or a sound of sheer silence. So quiet, it was nearly inaudible. But for Elijah, there was no mistake, that Yahweh was near. When he heard it, he wrapped his face in a mantle and stepped to the entrance of the cave where he had been waiting, just as Moses had hid his face from God and took shelter in the cleft of the rock on Mount Sinai. Once again, the Lord asked, what are you doing here, Elijah? And once again, Elijah made the very same response that he had made earlier, that he was the only faithful one left. But this time, there would be a clear directive from

God about what Elijah had to do. He was to go back, back to Damascus, and back to the people in the place he had been running away from. Like Moses, when he left the mountain, carrying new tablets under his arm of the law to read, the way, to lead the wayward Israelites, Elijah came down off that mountain with an appointed assignment from God. He was called to lead the Israelites back to God, and to put into motions, the events that would lead to the downfall of King Ahab and his family. Elijah would be the new Moses, destined to lead his people through a perilous time. I suppose none of us have stories nearly as dramatic as Elijah's who was ultimately taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. Yet all of us, at one time or another, have undoubtedly found ourselves stuck in a very dark place, searching for God. What happens when we pour our souls out to God with words like, why have you forgotten me? Only to be met with sheer silence. How long does it take, before we completely give up on God? Can life ever be found on the other side of despair? Christians have struggled for centuries to find answers to these questions. In the process, a rich tradition of teachings and practices has grown within church to guide us on our spiritual journeys. One model for spiritual discernment developed by St. John of the Cross dates back to the 16th century. He wrote about an experience which he called Dark Night of the Soul. The Dark Night which he writes about, is not something that should be considered completely negative or destructive. On the contrary, it is an experience, which is almost to be welcomed as a sick person might welcome surgery, when it promises to bring healing. The purpose of the darkness is not to punish or afflict us, but its purpose is to set us free of the distractions that have been impeding our relationship to God. St. John of the Cross embraced the soul's Dark Night as a sort of divine appointment, a privileged invitation to draw close to the divine center. What does this Dark Night look like? It may involve feelings of abandonment, dryness, desolation, emptiness, exactly the kind of things we spend a lot of time and energy trying to avoid normally. St. John described this in one of his poems as my house being now all stilled. Somehow, we've been sold on the idea that life should be one big celebration. And it isn't, we can certainly turn it into one. But the Dark Night of the soul is a time when we don't have that energy anymore, to try to put up a false front. Rather than our being able to run away from life's difficulties, we're stopped dead in our tracks. And as a result, we can be primed into a period of stillness and receptivity to God's voice, even when we didn't choose to be there. It's in times like these when we may benefit from a spiritual relationship. One such as working with a spiritual director, or meeting with a Stephen minister, or even talking with a trusted friend who can walk with us into the dark places, and provide support in the discernment process. This would not be a friend who rushes to your rescue and tells you to hurry up and get over it. But someone who offers a compassionate presence, and gentle acceptance, and may even be able to advise you if you need professional help, or medical treatment as well. A spiritual guide can be helpful in moving us beyond our need to order and fix life's problems, to embrace the whole of human life. With all its ambiguity, failure, and paradox. These are times when we have to be reminded that life isn't ultimately about problems, to be corrected according to our own desires, but a mystery to be lived into, including the pain and the chaos that can lead us into new birth. Elijah did not get the answer from Yahweh that he anticipated, when he complained of his miseries, feeling like a failure in every way. First, he asked to die. But instead the angel gave him bread and water. Next he bemoaned the fact that he wasn't as good as his ancestors. And he was ordered to take a long journey to the same place where Moses had met God. Then he was told that the glory of the Lord would pass by, but it didn't happen in any of the usual ways, only in a thin murmuring sound. And at last, Elijah continued to insist that he was the only faithful one left in Israel. But still he was instructed to go back, to face all the faithless people he had been complaining about all along. None of this was anything he had asked for. He wanted simply a peaceful

end. And what he got was a lot of chaos. But this was the path he was called to follow, for a genuine encounter with God. This was the way God re-energized him, to go deeper and to go forward, to become the obedient servant he was created to be. Like Elijah, God has surprising things in store for each of us. Are you listening for that still small voice? Are you brave enough to answer? I love an image given to me at a workshop by Parker Palmer, a Quaker and well known spiritual writer. And this relates to an experience he once had, while rappelling down a very steep precipice. If you've ever done this or seen it done, you know that rappelling involves dangling from a series of ropes, as you gingerly make your way safely to the bottom. Parker was climbing down carefully but steadily, until he reached a very awkward place with a rock face suddenly turned away from him at a very sharp angle. Suddenly, he was dangling in midair with nothing to grab onto. He was not only terrified but paralyzed as well. It took him a moment to be able to regain his composure long enough to think about what kind of help he needed. But when he did so, he called out only in a tiny little child like voice, "Help!" The instructor who was watching all this from his own safe place on the ground, called back to him, "Parker, if you can't get out of it, get into it." Meaning for Parker to bemoan his state of affairs would get him nowhere. He was going to have to fully enter into his predicament to see what new possibilities would present themselves for the future, and then go with it, or else he would be stuck dangling in the same place for the rest of his life. Sounds a lot like something Yahweh would have said to Elijah, doesn't it? Or maybe even to you or to me. If you can't get out of it, get into it. The Lord is surely with you. And there will be bread for the journey.