



HEAVENLY RHYTHMS

How to lead authentically, even if you feel like an imposter



“How have things been? How have you been?”

“Well, it’s been a season”

That is one of the most often heard refrains from anyone called to lead in these tumultuous days and times. Sometimes the season of leadership has been stark as winter, as funds and co-laborers slowly dwindled away, felled by the pandemic, like so many trees in an ice storm. Other times, the season of ministry has felt like a wild summer of thunderstorms, as entire ministry structures have been overturned (some church cultures, too). The season in which we find ourselves has become increasingly polarized. For almost everyone we know, leadership of late has been like ice-skating in a bathing suit — uncomfortable and undoubtedly sub-optimal. ▶

So, how do we do it? How do we continue to serve and lead when we are spun and spent and empathy-fatigued? How do we authentically lead when we feel unsupported and badgered or dry and dull? Or perhaps we even feel like impostors, ministering the presence of God when we feel the distance of God so acutely?

Let Jesus Care for You

There is a particular story from Scripture featuring none other than Elijah, the Bible's peripatetic power-prophet, that has brought me (Allison) fresh hope for remaining through difficult seasons. Though the entirety of the narrative can be found in 1 Kings 19, at this point in Elijah's story, we need to know a few things. Elijah has just experienced one of the most difficult ministerial encounters of his life, as he faced the prophets of Baal in Yahweh's name and power.

Elijah has been threatened with death by the queen and runs a "full day's journey" into the desert. At last, he falls down under a broom tree, and asks God to take his life. Then Elijah promptly falls asleep. Beautifully, God did not rebuke or upbraid the prophet. He didn't shake him awake to give him a "man up, you man-of-God" speech. Instead, God sent an angel to minister to Elijah, and the first thing the heavenly messenger did was touch the sleeping man.

Fall into that for a moment. The angel touched the anguished minister. No heraldic announcement. No singing choirs. No ladders with angels ascending and descending. No pillar of fire or cloud of presence. Just a gentle, tender touch on a body that had borne much. As Elijah awakened, the Angel of the Lord fed him and asked him to drink water. Don't rush past that. Sometimes when we are spent and spun, we need to embody the grace that is ours in Christ by simply caring for the temples He entrusted to us.

After eating and drinking, Elijah "lay down again" (1 Kings 19:6). The passage continues as it paints a tender scene, "And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you'" (1 Kings 19: 7 ESV).

Aside from the fact that the angel touched and fed him again, in effect saying the angel's work was not quite finished, the following words of the Lord's angel touch something deep inside me — something I struggle to articulate.

"This journey is too much for you." The angel, with great kindness, says that the journey you still need to take is too much for you.

Jesus knows when what is coming will take more strength than we have. Jesus knows when the fuel on which we are running will not get us across the finish line. Jesus knows, friend. He knows when the journey ahead will exact from us a price we cannot pay. He knows. And he knows if we need to eat, drink and sleep a second time. Or a tenth. Or a hundredth.

Perhaps you need to sit for a moment and hear the care of Jesus for you: "This journey is still too much for you. You must fill up — again and again — so you can be sent out."

Eat. Drink. Sleep. Repeat.

Now you may be thinking, "That's great for Elijah, but is there any way to refill my tank short of an angelic visitation?" The answer is a resounding yes. After nearly twenty-five years in ministry, during which we experienced all the highs and lows that come along with any life in ministry, we have found a few tools that help keep our tanks full: spiritual formation through community, vulnerability and the practice of spiritual disciplines. ▶

Spiritual formation isn't about appearance at all; it's so much better than that. It is the beautiful process by which we are transformed into the image of Christ, a transformation that frees us from the nagging fear that says, "I am just an impostor; I have no business being in this role."



Photo courtesy of Camp Lutherhaven



The great truth of the gospel is that no matter what season we find ourselves in — winter or summer or somewhere in between — Jesus is faithful to lead us toward healing and wholeness.

Be in Community

A few years ago, I (Jonathan) was introduced to the term spiritual formation. For many people, particularly in the evangelical tradition where Allison and I have spent most of our Christian lives, spiritual formation is an unfamiliar, if not altogether unknown, term. While many of the practices that lead to spiritual formation are present in the life of the church, they are sometimes seen as unrelated practices instead of components of a clear plan for transformation — a plan that the brilliant teacher and philosopher Dallas Willard termed a “curriculum for Christlikeness.” So, what is spiritual formation?

In his book *The Great Omission*, Willard defines Christian spiritual formation this way: “Spiritual formation in Christ is the process whereby the inmost being of the individual (the heart, will or spirit) takes on the quality or character of Jesus Himself” (*Omission* 53) It is the process through which we become the very people we were always intended to be — unique individuals created in the image of God, who are being formed, transformed and re-formed into the image of Christ.

Did you notice anything missing from that description of spiritual formation? There’s nothing about *appearing* Christlike because the job demands it or the people we serve deserve it. No, there is nothing there at all about *looking* Christlike. Spiritual formation isn’t about appearance at all; it’s so much better than that. It is the beautiful process by which we are transformed into the image of Christ, a transformation that frees us from the nagging fear that says, “I am just an imposter; I have no business being in this role.”

One way we have experienced this transformation is through community, or more specifically, community that isn’t centered on our ministry work. This work can be consuming and, at the same time, very lonely. It’s in Christian community where we learn just to be ourselves again, where we are safe to focus on being beloved disciples, whether we are in professional ministry roles or not. This kind of community allows us to lay down the weight of responsibility we carry by remembering that we are never, ever alone. In this kind of community, we remind one another that the gospel applies to us, not just those we serve. Finding this kind of community isn’t always easy but it is always worth it, so ask God to give you a group of believers to do life with. Reconnect with old friends, get involved in your local church or create a “no work talk” group at your camp or conference center. Take the risk and jump in.

Embrace Vulnerability

Another way to defeat imposter syndrome and refill your tank is to practice genuine vulnerability. Be honest about your weakness and failure, your insecurities and your pride. Find appropriate ways to get real about your spiritual life. This life of vulnerability goes beyond accountability, although accountability is certainly a part of it. This vulnerability embraces the truth that we are all broken people who are being redeemed and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. None of us has earned our ministry role through mastery of the Christian life. Pretending to be someone we are not is absolutely exhausting, so embrace a more vulnerable life. When you do, you may find that the voice in your head that accuses you of being an imposter begins to fade into the background and the burdens you have carried begin to fall to the ground. ►

Practice Spiritual Disciplines

We are likely all familiar with many of the spiritual disciplines of our faith since our jobs often include encouraging others to do them. That's the danger. That familiarity can rob us of the present awareness that the spiritual disciplines are also needful for us! We barely have the time here to skim the surface of the spiritual disciplines but there are great resources to help you dive deeper, books like *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster or Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. With that in mind, let's briefly tour of a few spiritual practices.

In our instant, digital world, the disciplines of silence and solitude function like a spiritual reset by helping us turn off the outside world to focus on being with God. You can start by finding a spot to be alone and then setting a timer for 10 minutes. Next, focus on an attribute of God or a favorite verse. Introverts tend to love this, while it can be torture for the extroverts among us. It's important to remember the disciplines are tools to facilitate a transformative relationship with God, so use the tools that help you the most.

Meet with God through Scripture. Read the Bible for study and devotion. Read it through in a year or spend an unhurried time in one passage. Allow God's Word to do its work, to speak and equip.

As we meet with God through the discipline of fasting, our focus on God often intensifies, and the contents of our hearts are revealed. Through prayer, we live in conversation with God. Through worship, we behold the inexpressible glory of God and respond with all of ourselves. Through confession, we move toward the light of community and away from the darkness of isolation. These are only a few of the disciplines we have found to offer a salve for wounding, fresh grace for burnout and renewed hope for what lies ahead.

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The great truth of the gospel is that no matter what season we find ourselves in — winter or summer or somewhere in between — Jesus is faithful to lead us toward healing and wholeness. We can truly trust Him with the rhythms of our lives.

Blessings on you, fellow sojourners. For the King and the Kingdom. ■



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Jonathan Allen is a worship pastor and songwriter and is deeply passionate about connecting people with Jesus in worship and sharing his heart with other worship leaders. It has been his great joy to lead in worship in the local church as a worship pastor, at national conferences and missionally for 25 years. As a student, Allison Allen was chosen as an Andrew Carnegie Scholar at the prestigious acting program at Carnegie Mellon University and went on to perform on Broadway and write numerous plays and musicals. She now uses her gifts to teach the Bible all over the country. She is the author of the books *Shine: Stepping into the Role You Were Made For* and *Thirsty for More: Discovering God's Unexpected Blessings in a Desert Season*. Jonathan and Allison live in Franklin, Tennessee, with their delightful sons, Luke and Levi.