

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33; Pentecost 10A; 8/9/20
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I am sure many of you remember the Elvis Presley song, *I Feel the Temperature Rising*. That was a song about a guy's reaction to a girl with whom he had a relationship. Well, the phrase *I feel the temperature rising* has been going through my head this past week and the reason has nothing to do with a love relationship! It has **everything** to do with the anxiety level I am sensing and feeling in our culture. As I have been talking with people, I have observed a growing sense of anxiety and fear as we near the beginning of an uncertain school year during this COVID-19 pandemic. I have also been noticing and feeling a real sense of anxiety as we move through the chaos of this election season. I do not think anyone can deny we are living during a time of augmented chaos and uncertainty. And, it is only natural that we are experiencing amplified anxiety and fear!

Anxiety and fear are vital responses to physical and emotional danger. And, if we could not experience a sense of fear, we could not protect ourselves from legitimate threats. However, sometimes, fear can be paralyzing, and it can keep us from living into the fullness of life, living a **centered** life, living into life that truly matters. So, being honest about our fear and exposing ourselves to our personal demons by facing our fears is the best way to move through them and beyond them.

In today's readings from scripture, we discover our ancestors in faith also faced fear and anxiety. In our reading from 1 Kings, Elijah was living in fear. He had faithfully preached truth to power when he spoke to the evil King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Then, the Queen had sent a messenger to Elijah telling him that she intended to kill him that very day. Shackled by fear, Elijah goes and hides on Mount Horeb, the mountain also known as Mount Sinai. On that mountain, he waits for God to reveal God's self to him. The temperature of Elijah's anxiety continues to rise as he experiences a great wind, an earthquake, and fire. But, in these displays of natural forces, God did not seem present. Rather, Elijah's encounter with "sheer silence" calls him back to his prophetic tasks. By **centering** himself in silence toward God, he again discovered God's presence to him. He experienced what St. Paul references in today's reading from Romans when he writes, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."

In today's gospel, we hear a story that not only addresses the fear that can literally overpower us, but also the even greater power of God's loving presence to us, a presence that **will never let us go**. As we meet up with Jesus, he has finally been able to send the crowds away. He has convinced his disciples to get in a boat and cross the lake ahead of him. Finally, he has found time to retreat and spend some time in prayer. As we

look at today's gospel reading, Jesus is not a superhero who has retreated to his bat cave. He is not a ghost out to haunt the already terrified. He is a man. Fully God, fully human. He is the Son of God, though those around him don't yet recognize him. His ministry is being battered by the rejection of his hometown folks and the beheading by Herod of his cousin John the Baptist. Jesus knows his time is coming. Crowds of needy people have been constantly pressing in on him. And, he needs some time alone.

Jesus is praying, perhaps lifting up each of **his** fears and struggles to God and exchanging them for faith, allowing the comfort and healing and power of God to fill his inner life, his heart, mind, emotions, and will. After all, this is what the Jewish scriptures tell us to do, to surrender all our lesser fears to our fear of the Lord, which means our **reverence** for God, for who God is and what God can do. Then, as Jesus looks up and squints at the horizon, he sees the disciples' little boat bobbing side to side, back and forth, and up and down on the **chaotic** water.

Well, the disciples have spent nearly the whole night struggling to get across that blasted lake before Jesus shows up near daybreak. The Sea of Galilee is not a massive body of water, never more than seven miles across when traveling east-west. Yet, they've not been able to traverse it, for the storm has "battered" or "thrashed" their boat. And, as for the

churning sea? In their worldview, it represents **chaos** and **danger**. The temperature of their anxiety is rising! Then, they think they see a ghost! Fear erupts because they anticipate how the story will probably end. All night they have been threatened by the prospect that this chaos might devour them. They saw themselves as disciples left to die at the mercy of more powerful forces. Talk about a situation that causes the temperature of one's fear and anxiety to rise!

Finally, the disciples realize this seeming "ghost" is Jesus, striding **over and above the sea, transcending** the watery **chaos**. And, astoundingly, Peter wants to step out there on that **chaotic** water. Peter steps out of the boat and enters the tumult. And, Peter flounders. He flounders because he grows afraid. Quite frankly, that fear is justified. The storm is still powerfully raging and it is so intense it could sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has perfectly good reason to be afraid.

And, so do we. There are multiple reasons each one of us might face fear. Maybe you fear what will happen as school begins and this virus is likely to again spike. Maybe you fear someone in your family will get this virus. Maybe you fear loneliness after loss. Or, fear aging and all the issues that come with growing old. Or, maybe you fear for your kids and what they are experiencing or will experience. Or, you fear facing a new

chapter in life, or making a major life-changing decision. Or, you fear for the future of our congregation, or the direction of our country, or global security.... You name it! There are multiple situations and reasons in our individual, congregational and communal lives that make us afraid. And that fear can be paralyzing, debilitating, and make it difficult for us to move forward or even have any sense of confidence. In fact, as theologian David Lose says, "Fear is one of the primary things that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us."

Well, in response to Peter's fear, Jesus doesn't simply urge Peter to buck up, be a man, be courageous, let go of his fear and focus on him. Instead, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus literally **catches** him! He grabs hold of Peter! Jesus grabs him and saves him from drowning. He grabs him and restores him to his vocation as a disciple. And, guess what? **He does the same with us. Jesus will not, he absolutely will never, let us go.** Jesus is **never** going to give up on us, no matter what we do! The God we know in Christ is truly THE LOVE THAT WILL NEVER LET US GO! In the depth of our fear, Jesus grabs us, holds on to us when we falter and restores us to where we can again be of service to him.

Today's gospel, life-giving word to us is a message that is not only about our fear. It is a message that is the **heart** of the gospel message. It

is the gospel good news of grace which proclaims that God will never give up on us, that God is **with** us and **for** us, that God – in the end – will do what we cannot do for ourselves and save us. This is a message that enables us to cope with life and with our fear because it is a message that enables us to **transcend** that fear. We may not be able to defeat it, but we can face it, stand in the swirling disorder and chaos, and do what needs to be done even when we are afraid. And, quite frankly, this is the nature of what it means to live out an active life of faith, to be willing to throw oneself into a disorderly world and expect to encounter Jesus there. I love what William Willimon says about this passage. He writes:

If Peter had **not** ventured forth, had **not** obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea and [discover] his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

Yes, we do feel the temperature of our anxiety and fear rising.

However, as we face our fear, getting out of the boat **with** Jesus and going to the places where Jesus goes as we truly love and care for **all** others is the riskiest, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest, life that truly matters, life that is abundant. And, this God we see in Jesus, will **always** be holding on to us and **never let us go!**