

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 13, 2023

Faith, Okemos

I Kings 19: 9-18, Psalm 85:8-13, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

Now the Silence

[God] said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

This reading from I Kings is paired with the Matthew story of Jesus going up on a mountain by himself to pray. Elijah had been sentenced to death by Queen Jezebel, held responsible for the death of the 450 prophets of the god Baal. He was running for his life, surely scared but also so depressed that he just wanted to die. We read, in the wilderness "he asked God that he might die. 'It is enough, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'" (Read 19:3-10)

Then these words from God, "Go out and stand on the mountain..."

In the gospel story Jesus has just dismissed an enormous crowd where the sick were cured and 5000 men plus women and children had been fed by the disciples with five loaves and two fish blessed by Jesus.

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone...

But, unlike Elijah, Jesus was not running for his life. Surely he too was grieving, though not for himself like Elijah, but from the news that his cousin, John the Baptist, had just been beheaded by order of King Herod. And Jesus was no doubt weary from a very long day caring for probably 10,000 or more people. And likely he was mindful that the day would come when he too, like John, would be put to death. Jesus needed to be alone; he needed quiet; he needed time to pray.

During the Confession of Sins, the moments when we are silent are intentional. And I have asked Bruce to wait a minute or so after this sermon before introducing the hymn of the day just for silence. It was in “a sound of sheer silence” or in other translations “a still small voice” or “a softly whispering voice” that the LORD spoke to Elijah. I think it was how his Father spoke to and with Jesus, his Son...And I suspect, a primary way the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit speak to all of us.

I am only beginning to appreciate the words of Martin Luther who said that when he knew the day ahead would be especially challenging, he would pray for two hours before engaging all that would come that day. [I am nowhere yet near that laudable discipline!] But don't you and I know that when we have been still, as still as best we can be, if even for a few minutes, we are sometimes given greater focus and clarity about what's next in our lives; yes, what and how God would have us be and do for the most loving living of each day?

“Now the Silence” is a beautiful hymn you may have heard and perhaps sung. I've asked Deb to sing it during Holy Communion today. I speak the words now:

Now the silence, Now the peace, Now the empty hands uplifted; Now the kneeling, Now the plea, Now the Father's arms in welcome; Now the hearing, Now the pow'r, Now the vessel brimmed for pouring; Now the body, Now the blood, Now the joyful celebration, Now the wedding, Now the songs, Now the heart forgiven leaping; Now the Spirit's visitation, Now the Son's epiphany, Now the Father's blessing. Now. Now. Now.

Now the silence, now wherein the still small voice may be heard... For Jesus and for each of us in whom he dwells, such silence is filled with God's very self. The sheer silence is a way God prepares us for challenges, including the storms that lie ahead.

When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

Early in the morning, early each morning, might we say, might we believe Jesus is walking toward us?

I think about the people on the island of Maui where the wind and the waves and, most disastrously, the raging fires have swept through entire villages. Can they

believe that Jesus is walking toward them, these shocked and devastated people? Can they believe that his Father's arms are now and forever holding even loved ones who have perished? ...For the survivors, maybe not right now. Maybe now God is for them at best an apparition, at worst bringing judgment and death.

But can we believe that Jesus is walking toward them? Can we believe that when their hope and their faith is failing, when they are drowning, Jesus is reaching out to rescue them?

A member of Faith in a recent Tuesday Bible study shared a challenge for our congregation. It is, albeit, much, much less consequential than that faced by the people of Maui. In approving our annual budget, we counted on the sale yet this year of a portion of our property to eliminate our still significant nearly half-million building debt. But now it seems likely that the sale will not be consummated so quickly.

Granted, this is nowhere near the challenge faced by the people of Hawaii, but it is our challenge. Will we meet our obligations of providing Word and sacrament and other forms of caring for each other and of providing consistent care for others in this hurting and frightened world we have been called to generously and steadfastly serve?

But hear the gospel for the people of Hawaii and for the people of Faith: For this and for any other challenges we face, whether great or small, Jesus on the mountain, in the night of our distress, has already prayed for us. And now Jesus is on his way to help us. Though we may not immediately recognize him, can we not in the silence of our hearts hear him say, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."?

But maybe we are Peter:

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." [Jesus] said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Hear the gospel:

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

One thoughtful commentator has suggested that Jesus' words, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" were not a harsh, belittling criticism, but a gentle, softly spoken reminder to Peter to trust that Jesus has got this. The worst storms in our lives cannot separate us from God's saving love made known to us in his Son.

Now, in the silence following this sermon, think of a strong, battering wind in your life. Then hear Jesus, walking on troubled waters, saying to you, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Amen.

JDS