

Sermon for Proper 14 (Year A)

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

9 August 2020

✠ **I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

He was exhausted, frightened, and abandoned. He was fleeing from a death threat—and Queen Jezebel did not make death threats idly. And that’s where we find Elijah at the beginning of today’s reading, holed up in a cave, feeling very sorry for himself.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks, and Elijah pours out his litany of complaints, which boils down to how truly awesome he has been, such a devoted follower of the Lord, and literally everyone else, every single other person in Israel, is an idol-worshipper, prophet-killer, and Elijah-threatener.

“I want to show you something,” God says. “Get out of your cave, and I will pass by.” And then come the mighty demonstrations of power. First a violent wind cracked the rocks and split the mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then after the wind came an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then after the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

Where was the Lord, then? That’s what we want to know, isn’t it? Where is the Lord? How do I hear his voice? When I studied spiritual direction, we were taught to ask again and again, “Where is God in this?” Well, yeah, great question.

The Lord was not in the wind. The Lord was not in the earthquake. The Lord was not in the fire.

So why bother with the wind, the earthquake, the fire? I wish I knew. Because sometimes the Lord *is* in the wind. The disciples were out in their boat, exhausted, frightened, and seemingly abandoned by Jesus, who had gone up on the mountain to pray, as Elijah had gone up on the mountain to hide and to sulk. The wind was against them, the waves were battering the boat, and in the midst of the wind, on the surface of the water, there is the Lord. Sometimes the Lord *is* in the wind.

But it doesn't look like the Lord. It looks like a ghost, and the disciples are terrified and screaming. "Take heart, it is I," Jesus says to them; "do not be afraid." "It is I": *ego eimi*, I am. Those were the words of God to Moses on Horeb, the mount of God, when he called out of the burning bush—you see, sometimes the Lord is in the fire—when Moses asked God his name, and God told him, "Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you."

Sometimes the Lord is in the fire. "I am," he says, and commissions Moses. Sometimes the Lord is in the wind. "I am," he says, and calms the disciples.

But for Elijah the Lord was not in the wind. The Lord was not in the earthquake. The Lord was not in the fire. So where was the Lord?

After the fire, there was—our translation says, a sound of sheer silence. The Revised Standard Version retained the familiar words, "a still, small voice." (We'll hear that in the anthem.) One newer translation says—and I think this is beautiful—"there was a sound. Thin. Quiet." Wind, earthquake, and fire were traditional symbols of God's manifestation in power; but this, this thin, quiet, whisper, this still, small voice, was not the expected thing.

But was the Lord even in the still, small voice? It's not clear, and maybe Scripture is leaving it ambiguous for a reason. We are not told "But the Lord was not in the silence"; we are not told "And the Lord, at last, was in the silence." I would so like this to be an easy Scriptural teaching about getting silent to hear the divine voice—I could preach on that in my sleep—but it isn't. "Where is God in this?" I'm supposed to ask; and the "sound. Thin. Quiet." doesn't answer my question.

If God *is* in the still, small voice, in a way that he was not in the wind or earthquake or fire, Elijah doesn't seem terribly impressed with it. Elijah pulls his hood down over his head and steps just to the mouth of the cave, just at the threshold. God asks him the same question as before, and Elijah gives the same self-pitying answer.

"Very well," God says. "You are tired of being my prophet? Go anoint Elisha to carry out the ministry that has pushed you to the brink of despair. You hate the lawlessness of Israel? Go anoint Hazael and Jehu as kings, and they will put an end to it. You think you are the only one left? Oh, no: there are still thousands who follow me."

And this is the beginning of the end of Elijah's ministry. It will have a spectacular finish, as you know—chariots of fire and all that—but the still, small voice does not whisper to Elijah of greater things; it does not inspire him to new heights; it barely even reassures him. Where is God in this? Not in the displays of power, the recognizable symbols of wind, earthquake, and fire; perhaps not even in the sound, thin, quiet. Perhaps only in a word of command, a task given, a burden shifted, a reassurance that gives hope but does not really seem to change anything. Where is God in this? This passage doesn't want to give us an easy answer. God is elusive, faithfulness is hard, and God is not overwhelmingly interested in our need for cheerleading and pep talks.

And yet sometimes God *is* in the wind. He looks like an apparition at first, terrifying, but he comes walking toward us on the water. Don't miss the importance of the water. We get three of the traditional four elements in the Elijah story: the earth quaking, the fire burning, the air blowing. In the Gospel we get the fourth: water, for the people of Israel the most ancient symbol of chaos and confusion, and of God's triumph over it. The Lord comes, terrifyingly, in the midst of chaos that is no chaos to him, but to us is confusion and anxiety and the precariousness of being always on the brink of destruction. "It is a ghost," the disciples scream; "It is I," Jesus replies.

And then Peter—good old Peter, who unlike Elijah is not at the end, but just getting started—has an idea. Only Matthew tells us this part of the story, but we all know it as well as if it were everywhere, and in this place especially, where the story is depicted in the east window that we face Sunday after Sunday. "Lord, if it is you," Peter says, "command me to come to you on the water."

Where is God in this? God, wherever you are in this, bid me come to you. God, wherever you are in this, let me recognize you. God, wherever you are in this, reach out your hand to me and hold me up over the chaos and the rejection and the confusion, over the precariousness of being on the brink of destruction.

And the Lord is truly in the wind, and he says to Peter, "Come."

And Peter comes. He steps out of the boat and he starts walking. "Come," Jesus says, like a parent just far enough away from the kid on the bicycle when the training wheels have just come off. "Come." And he does.

He doesn't make it, of course. He gets scared, the bike wobbles, he begins to sink. But before we make fun of poor Peter, let's dwell for a moment on the fact that he got out of the boat. He trusted Jesus. Not enough, as it turned out, but then can we ever trust Jesus enough? He trusted him, went out to meet him over the chaos and confusion.

And Jesus stretched out his hand to rescue Peter, and brought him back to safety. Yes, he does say, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" But even a little faith, faith the size of a mustard seed, is great and powerful, and I think I hear in Jesus' words not so much a rebuke as a backhanded compliment, said not with anger or disappointment but with a grateful smile. "You of little faith—but still faith that trusts me. Not enough, but then you can never trust me enough. You of little faith that nonetheless trusted me and came out to meet me over the chaos and confusion."

I saw one commentator say that when we feel we have no faith, or not enough faith, maybe it's because we aren't doing anything that *requires* faith. Yikes. Complaining like Elijah when things are bad takes no faith. Stepping out over the chaos and reaching out to God when you find him in the wind and confusion does require faith, and you recognize that faith, you feel that faith, when you do something that requires faith. It requires faith to love our enemies and pray for them. It requires faith to show up day after day, week after week, expecting an encounter with the Lord that doesn't always come. Even a little faith—but still faith that trusts God and goes out to meet him over the chaos and confusion.

Where is God in this? God, wherever you are in this, bid me come to you. God, wherever you are in this, let me recognize you. God, wherever you are in this, reach out your hand to me and hold me up over the chaos and the rejection and the confusion, over the precariousness of being on the brink of destruction.

And if all I can do is to pull my hoody down over my head, stand on the threshold, and await a word from you that shifts my burden, give me the faith even to do that.