

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC August 8, 2020
19th Sunday of Year A I Kings 19:9, 11-13

Today's first reading would have us reflect on where and how we hear God's voice in our lives; where and how do we discern God's presence. Of course, there are those who claim to have direct access to God, communicating the message they have received, ranting and raving, quoting snatches of the Bible, as they make their way through the streets and subway. Probably most of us wouldn't be too interested in hearing what they have to say. Then, there are those who claim to be able to read the evidence of God's favor or disfavor in the midst of world events. Just yesterday I received a Facebook text from someone I have known since elementary school. I'm sure it is has gone viral, so you may have seen it too. In bold letters the text posed this question. "Tornados, hurricanes, earthquake, flood, the worst fires in history, a virus going around the world, and people are still fighting to take GOD out of everything? Seems to me GOD is sending a message loud and clear." I would not agree. Often there is a tendency, a temptation, to look at some big cosmic event, and read into it the signs of divine purpose and intention. Those who do so usually seem to think that God is trying to scare us or punish us.

Today's first reading tells us that the voice of God is not found in some cataclysmic even, neither in the whirlwind, nor in the earthquake, nor in fire, but rather in the simple rustle of the breeze. It is in the most ordinary, seemingly uninspired and uninspiring events of the day that we can catch the signs of God's presence, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. God is discovered lurking in the quiet corners of our lives, whenever we are forced to lift up our gaze from the places, the faces, the walls we glance at in our usual haphazard manner, and suddenly see their signs of the wonder, of the beauty of life.

God is found in those spaces between people, when they give and receive from each other's abundance with a generosity not limited by fear, anxiety, or desperate need. God is present in all those seemingly small, but necessary acts wherein people do justice and make love, when they are shaping a society, a world that is built on the example given us by Jesus Christ. In short, the voice of God is heard when there may be no speech at all, not the blazing noise of some cataclysmic event, but only the simple gesture of human kindness. The question, then, is where and how does that become apparent today. In the midst of the pandemic we are currently living through, I believe we can see God's presence in the example of nurse who holds the hand of a dying patient, separated from family and loved ones, so that he or she does not have to die in total isolation. It is the hospital cleaner who stops to pray with a terrified

patient in the ICU. It is the doctor who after a long, grueling day caring for the sick and dying, goes home to prepare a pasta of penne arrabiata for one Italian-American patient, who, just released from 34 days on a ventilator, had told him that that was what he wanted more than anything else.

God is present when people are simply available to each other. It so often happens that on the occasion of some tragedy, or sorrow in another's life--be it a friend, an acquaintance, a family member--people may feel that they are supposed to say something: to provide an answer, a solution, a word to cheer that person up. And so, feeling ill-equipped for the task, they leave it for someone else to do, someone whom they think is better qualified for that task. Perhaps, out of embarrassment, or fear of only making matters worse, they may avoid that grieving person entirely. But the truth is words matter very little; what matters most is just being there, staying there for that person. I am reminded of how people extend their sympathy at the typical Irish wake. A person prays before the casket of the deceased, and then rises and turns to the surviving family members to say something very trite, very ordinary like, "I'm sorry for your trouble." But when words fail, when no word can gather up the welter of one's feelings and emotions, then simple compassion, support, standing beside, just showing up, is all that matters.

That is because the premier Christian virtue is compassion. It is assuming another's burden; it is refusing to allow that person to suffer alone. It is doing what one can, be a little or large, to lighten another's load. It is to stand in solidarity with another person, whatever form that may take. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of the famous aviator, wrote in her diary on the occasion of her baby's kidnapping that the worst part of suffering is the extreme isolation one feels in the midst of their grieving. Compassion is the attempt to bridge that chasm, if not by words, at least by presence, by being there when needed. It is not to preserve the person from the suffering they are going through, for that may be impossible. It is not necessarily to rescue him or her from the unfortunate place wherein they find themselves, but it is to assure that person that they do not have to stay there alone, in isolation. It is in the quiet compassionate deed that God's presence is most assuredly felt.

Today's first reading advises us to be alert to the subtle signs of God's presence--to be able to read in seemingly ordinary occurrences a hint of what is extraordinary; to use the power of our imagination to make that connection between the Divine and the everyday. In our Eucharist we recall the example of Jesus on the cross, the witness of a God who suffers with us, Who takes upon Himself all the evil and pain that human beings are capable of inflicting.

Let us pray that we can be the signs of God's presence to others, that God can work in us and through us, so that by our quiet, wordless presence to others in their grief, in their sorrow, we can be the agents of God's healing grace.