

## 9 August 2020

### Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Matthew 14: 22-33*

The first reading and Gospel account show a movement from our Strength, to our Failures, and point the way forward.

When on Mount Carmel I stood next to a statue of fiery Elijah, knife in his hand ready to kill the prophet of the false God Baal. You might recall the scene from a chapter earlier in the Bible than today's first reading when Elijah, the only prophet of the God of Israel remaining, challenged the hundreds of prophets of Baal to light into fire a sacrificial offering by prayer alone. All the prophets of Baal couldn't do it. But after dousing the wood with water to make it even harder to light, Elijah prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the fire was lit. Thus victorious, he got the army on his side and joined them in slaughtering all those false prophets. That's the subject of that statue, strong Elijah after defeating the false prophets. I posed for a photo next to that statue trying to strike the same pose and was unconvincing to observers. That's ok; I never wanted to use any God given power that way. Centuries after Elijah, Jesus taught us that power is given to us not to have power over others, but to serve others. But for his day and at the time, Elijah was accounted a hero. That was a good day for him.

But even Elijah had moments of not being so strong. Case in point, today's first reading of Elijah in a cave waiting for God to speak. This reading is often used to make the point that it is important to quiet yourself to hear a whispering sound of God, and while I think that's true I don't think that's what the Scripture is about. Why is Elijah in a cave in the first place? Because he is HIDING from his responsibility to be a prophet. Queen Jezebel didn't exactly like it that he killed on her prophets and was seeking his life in return, so he fled. Basically, he was tired of being a prophet and decided it was time to save his own skin.

And that Hebrew phrase that described God's response to Elijah that gets translated "tiny whispering sound" **can also mean "silence."** Elijah learns that God is not going to talk to him while he's running away. **Sometimes when we don't sense the presence of God or hear God's voice in our hearts, it's because we're not trying very hard to follow his call.**

However, God does say something after that chilling silence. He says to **Elijah, "Why are you here???"** It's like he's saying to Elijah, "I have things for you to do, so get out of this cave and go!" And he sends him back into the fray where his life will again be at risk as he is told to anoint rival kings that will be faithful to the God of Israel.

THAT'S what I think we can all relate to. Knowing we have a responsibility to follow God's call, to serve God's people, to be a peacemaker, a provider, and healer...and finding it easier to not follow that call, not listen for it, to find a comfortable cave and stay there. Sometimes it takes a nudge from God, from a friend who speaks for God, from our conscience. Listen for it.

There's lots of reasons we don't follow the call of God. One big one is that we don't seek it out, but another that we don't feel up to the task. **We have failed, we continue to fail, and we know that we will fail in our efforts to follow God's will.** To use today's dramatic image from the **Gospel, we will sink in the water.**

Sometimes the wind is with us and that God given desire to live a joyful, generous, serving life really happens and we feel the exhilaration of walking on water. We know when we are in communion with God and had a day that really gave God glory by what we said and did. But then we sin. We fail. We get self-absorbed, fearful—greed and lust and vanity replace our simple desire to be there for God to use. After a while, our failures and sins can lead us to stop trying so hard. That's tragic because it lets fear of failure short-circuit the purpose of our life.

**But there is a way forward.** The most important part of today's Gospel story is not when Jesus and Peter walk on water; rather, it is when Peter screams with his mouth half full of water, "Lord, Save Me!" And Jesus, Matthew tells us "immediately" stretches out his hand to save him. I like to think that the evangelist missed a line Jesus spoke then. It helps me to hear Jesus say, "Take my hand!"

When we fail to do what we are called to do, he says "Take my hand." When we feel unworthy of God's love because of our sins, he says "Take my hand." When we know what must be done but are afraid to do it, he says "Take my hand." When you lost the vision or energy to keep trying, he says "Take my hand."

So, the bad news is that we will fail again and again. The Good News, the Gospel, is that again and again Jesus will say "Take my hand."