

Thoughts in the Time of COVID-19—#15, April 22, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

A Biblical Reflection: Where is God? In this trying time, people wonder where is the Lord in our suffering, fear, and anxiety. Perhaps you have seen a blog posting or encountered a story in the media about this question. There are many suggestions about coping with isolation, separation from loved ones, the stress of job loss or financial insecurity. As believers, we often turn to the Bible for inspiration and one of the texts that might help in the experience of the prophet Elijah.

In the First Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah flees from the Israelites who do not want to hear his message from God and are seeking to end his life. After fleeing into the desert, he receives heavenly aid in the form of some food and drink to prepare him for a long journey through the desert to a mountain (forty days—we're getting close to that in our "lockdown") where he comes to a cave:

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' He 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 (1 Kings 19.9–13).

As we ponder this passage, perhaps certain aspects strike us: Elijah had done nothing wrong; in fact, he was doing what God wanted him to do in speaking to the Israelites God's message. Yet Elijah was persecuted and had to flee. It wasn't Elijah's fault he was suffering. Where was God for Elijah, we may wonder?

God directed Elijah to a place apart from his usual haunts—the cave in the mountain. To get there, Elijah needed to leave his regular life behind and take a long, arduous journey. We hear that God gave him the nourishment he needed to continue for that long journey. He didn't magically transport Elijah to the cave. Maybe there was a reason why Elijah needed to make the journey himself? Perhaps Elijah needed the time to prepare himself for what came next.

When he reached the cave, Elijah explained his predicament, laying out his suffering before the Lord. God's response was interesting. He revealed Himself to the prophet but in an unexpected way. God didn't manifest Himself in a spectacular fashion with flashes of fire, by an earthquake or a mighty wind (as God did at other times in the Old Testament). Instead, God showed Himself in "sheer silence"... Quiet and stillness are where the prophet met the Lord.

Our situation is not the same as Elijah's but there are some similarities. We too face a situation not of our making; we also are on a journey through a difficult time towards an uncertain

future; we too cry to the Lord asking God to manifest His power and glory in coming to our aid. Could it be that we too expect something spectacular from God as proof of His presence and concern?

This makes me wonder if right now I should be looking for God in the small spaces, the silences and tiny gestures I am experiencing: the phone calls from friends, messages from parishioners and acquaintances, help with projects from those who can still work, the moments of quiet prayer.

For me, this means the daily interactions with the priests I live with and the strange, small Masses celebrated with this handful of priests at which we pray for the diocese, for all parishioners, the Church universal, for all who are suffering from COVID-19 or the loss of a loved one to it, and for all the front-line workers coming to society's aid.

God gave Elijah the strength to go to the mountain cave to meet Him in the power of silence. God gives us strength through His grace to cope too with our long journey even if our 'trip' is to stay within the confines of our house, or apartment or room for a while more. We too are on a journey to the mountain to meet the Lord—our mountain and cave experience may be when we are finally—after all the restrictions—able to gather to celebrate Mass where Christ Himself is silently present in the Sacred Host and Precious Blood of the Eucharist. Let us pray for one another on our journey with God and—at a social distance—one another.

God bless you.

✠ Terrence