

AUG. 10, 2014 - 19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

I think it would help to consider the background to the story of Elijah in today's first reading. After the death of King Solomon, there were a series of kings in Israel, some good, some not so good. One of the worst was Ahab, who married the infamous Jezebel. She led Ahab astray into the worship of the pagan god Ba'al and orchestrated the murder of all the prophets of the Lord.

In response, God raised up one of Israel's greatest prophets, Elijah. Through his intercession, food was miraculously multiplied and a widow's son was raised from the dead. With the Lord behind him, Elijah triumphed over the four hundred prophets of Ba'al all of whom he put to death.

Of course, this enraged Jezebel who sent assassins to kill him. Elijah fled into the desert where, worn out by hunger and constant persecution, he asked the Lord to take his life. Instead, God sent an angel with food to refresh Elijah. Strengthened by this heavenly meal, Elijah travelled forty days through the desert to the mountain of Horeb. Known also as Sinai, this was the mountain upon which God had first called Moses. And after God had freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, He led them to the same Mt. Horeb where He gave to Moses the Ten Commandments.

The first reading picks up the story of Elijah who has arrived at the holy mountain. He is still worn out and disheartened. He had been faithful to the mission God had given him, and yet his life was still in danger. God decides to reveal His presence to Elijah. First there is the roaring wind, then there is an earthquake, then there is a blazing fire. But God was not making Himself known in any of these impressive phenomena. Finally, there was a tiny whispering sound, and Elijah recognized that God was revealing His presence.

Our faith tells us that God is always with us. But there are many times when we don't feel God's presence. Perhaps we have even thought, "If only God would do this or that ... then I would know that He was present with me." But our God is a God of surprises, the God of the unexpected. It's easy to sense God's presence the voice of a friend, the smile of a baby, or a beautiful sunset. But God is always with us, even when we are feeling lonely, or the baby is crying, or it's a cloudy dreary day.

Or, in the midst of a storm on the sea ... as in today's Gospel. The disciples were in a boat crossing the lake when the winds turned against them. Jesus was not with them in the boat, but that did not mean he was not with them at all.

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Jesus was always with them; they were always on his mind and in his heart. And so Jesus comes to their rescue ... walking on the water. Can you imagine such a sight! It was portrayed very well in the recent movie, "Son of God," and I have a beautiful picture of the scene hanging in the rectory.

The disciples, of course, are terrified. Jesus tells them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid" is one of the most oft repeated phrases in the Bible. These words of Jesus apply to us in whatever circumstance we might find ourselves. No matter what kind of "storm" rages around us, Jesus speaks these words to you and to me: "Do not be afraid."

Then we have Peter. You gotta love Peter. He always so impulsive. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come," and Peter gets out of the boat, and finds himself walking on the water! But, it doesn't last. Peter gets afraid. He takes his eyes off of Jesus and focuses on the storm instead. and so he sinks. But he does have enough trust to cry out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus does. He reaches out his hand, pulls Peter up, and together they climb into the boat.

If we would just keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we could walk on whatever stormy seas life throws our way. Like Peter, like Elijah, we need to have the courage and the humility to cry out to the Lord, admitting that we cannot face the trials of life without Him.

Jesus says to Peter, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And Peter would doubt and fall, again and again. Whenever he took his eyes off of Jesus his faith would falter. It was only after the Resurrection that Peter's fearless faith in the Risen Lord would strengthen him to lead the Church through those early years of terrible persecution.

Last Sunday St. Paul told us that, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ." In the midst of fear, doubt, sickness, sorrow, disappointment, loss, or even persecution, Jesus is always with us. St. Paul assures us, "In all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loves us." If we listen for it, the tiny whispering voice of the Lord will speak to us in our heart, assuring us of His presence, His love, and His power to save us.