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“The Still Center”

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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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

In the two Scriptures we just heard, each in its own dramatic way, both of them are teaching us that God is found where we least expect to find healing grace: in the still eye of the storm.

We are all familiar with the story of Elijah. It has been presented to us over the last year in several different passages. Let me summarize. The point at which Elijah is on the top of Mt. Horeb where God is saying, “Come, listen to me as I pass by,” you must realize that at that point, he was beginning to come back to life. He was on the run; he was on the lam; he was afraid; he was disappointed, defeated, and distraught because Jezebel had made a commitment to put a bounty on his name. The reason is that when the prophet Elijah had won the incredible contest with the prophets of Baal, if you recall, he had them all killed. That religious competition was one of those dramatic scenes in all of the Old Testament, where the prophets of Baal were challenged by the prophet of God for a contest on who would light the fire where the bull was trussed up for sacrifice. God was to be invoked on either side, and whoever lit the fire of the trussed-up bull was to be declared the victor, and their god was to be vindicated. The cocky, confident Elijah was so convinced that he was going to be victorious that he built a moat around the altar and filled it with water to overflowing because he knew that his God was the only true God. He said, “Lord God, the bull,” and the fire came, burned up the sacrifice, and he and his people were declared the true victors over the prophets of Baal, who were exhausted trying to invoke their god to light the fire.

After the fire was lit and the victory was accomplished, in the frenetic enthusiasm of the moment, Elijah kills all the prophets. And then Jezebel, hearing the news of such slaughter, says, “I’m going to put your throat in the same condition as you put the throats of my prophets.” And he runs, fearful of his own life, depressed, anxious, despondent, and it takes several messages from the angel to get him off his duff.

Our story begins after the part of the story where Elijah is under the umbrella tree, and an angel kept bringing him bread and drink, and he finally eats and drinks and gets to the top of Mt. Horeb. The Lord God says, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. From there, the Lord is about to pass by.” You would expect God to come in earthquakes, winds, and fire, but no, the Lord was not in any of those. He was in the sound of sheer silence. It is there that Elijah heard the encouraging message to continue his faithful following of being a true prophet of God. Despite the storms of his life, he was willing to continue the journey to be a faithful prophet.

In parallel to that, we have the story of Jesus walking on the water. I think it’s good for us to hear this familiar story in its entirety because too often, we make jokes about walking on water as an example of the way in which we communicate, “Who do you think you are?” What intrigues me about this particular section of Matthew’s gospel is the way in which he inserts Peter as a key participant in teaching us about trust and fidelity to the Lord in the midst of the storms of our lives.

This past summer, I spent five weeks in Venice with the great evangelist, Mark, and I spent a week in Rome with Peter, the apostle, and all the focus was on the location of his tomb. We went under the necropolis, we went into the crypt around the Clementine chapel, and we went into the nave looking down into the confessional. It is all about Peter, that this is the place where the early Christian church venerated his remains. When we hear the Scriptures, it is not about the cult of the saints at all. What draws us to identify with Peter is his human, confident, impulsive, enthusiastic side. This disciple of the Lord was willing to take risks and step out. Everybody else was in the boat, fearful of the wind and the rain and the

storm, fearful for their lives, and when they see Jesus coming, they are afraid and terrified because they see him as a ghost. Jesus tries to calm them down and says, “Take heart, it is I, don’t worry, don’t be afraid.” Peter needs validation as only he does throughout the course of so many instances in the New Testament, and he says to the Lord, “If it’s really you, let me come to you on the water.” And the Lord says, “Fine. Come.” Peter steps out, and as soon as he steps out, he becomes very aware of the dangerous situation in which he finds himself that he didn’t anticipate, and he begins to sink, to go under, and he begins to drown. There, he cries out, “Lord, save me!”

All of us can identify with, in so many ways, a sense of drowning that Peter experienced in his own time. If you pay attention to world affairs, you know the sense of drowning in which our world is washed over full of the waters and waves of disease and violence. In Western Africa, when I see scenes on television of people lying in the streets that nobody will touch and care for because of the fear of the Ebola virus, you want the World Health Organization to rally the forces around these people, contain the disease, and heal those who are sick.

And then there is the endless cycle of violence: ethnic, religious, political. There is bombing in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Ukraine, and Syria. The storms of that kind of violence puts fear in all of our hearts, that the shakiness of this dangerous world in which we live reminds us that we need to pray for peace, to work towards peace. Is it a possible reality for the world in which we live?

And then there are the metaphorical storms that inevitably come our way. We will not be excluded from these storms. We weather most of them, but the reality is, we do not have to go far to confront those events and trials that threaten to take us down and drown us. You know that sense of drowning. School is starting. Parents are deeply concerned about the way in which their teenage children are affected by group peer pressure. Then there is the basic fear in all of us about our own mortality. I was reading Christopher Hitchens’ book, *Mortality*. He has this to say about the way in which one moment, you’re diagnosed with a disease, and the next moment, you land in another world. He writes, “I see it as a very gentle and firm deportation, taking me from the country of the well across the stark frontier that marks off the land of malady.” How many of us have walked through those worlds

from one land to the next, or walked with those who we love the most? Yes, there are the risks of alcohol, drugs, reckless driving—all of these and more you can name are very well represented by stories of waters that threaten to drown us. Though we weather most of those storms, the message that we heard today in both of these examples of Elijah and Peter is that we must stand as men and women of faith and of trust.

God came to Elijah in the tiny whispering sound and was given the courage to get on with it as a prophet. Christ walked the waves to reach his disciples and gave a helping hand to Peter and to all of us, who Peter represents in the storms of our lives. I invite you to look through the eyes of Peter and Elijah and see what they ultimately and finally experienced in the storms of their lives and that they experienced God's undeserving and unstinting grace. All we can do in the midst of these storms that are out of our control, within our control, or in our midst is to simply trust in God's good future, not naively, but trusting deeply and profoundly, that in our future, no matter what storm we experience, our God will be there for us, with us, around us, so that we are not of little faith, but we truly trust and believe that it is He.

References: Hitchens, *Mortality*, New York: Twelve, 2012.

M. Hellwig