

Sermon for August 9, 2020

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Storms – today’s Old Testament and New Testament text include storms. For Elijah the storms come in the form of winds so strong they split mountains, earthquakes and fire. For Peter and the disciples, the storms arise on the waters, wind and waves battering their boat. But in both texts, the storms are more than external, there are internal storms brewing, more wildly than those in the weather.

In our text we find Elijah in a cave. A little backstory prior to his arrival in the cave: Elijah had predicted and experienced a drought and been an instrument of miracles multiplying food and bringing a dead child back to life. He had confronted powerful men about their sin and challenged priests of a false god to a duel of sorts, providing signs to prove the presence of the God of Israel so that hearts may be turned. He had commanded the death of his opponents, those that opposed God. His life is now in danger and as his opponents seek revenge he flees in fear.

In the text just prior to today’s reading, Elijah’s fear turns to resignation “It is enough; no, O Lord, take away my life...” Exhausted, overwhelmed, traumatized, afraid...Elijah has had enough of this storm-filled life. He lies down in the wilderness under a tree and falls asleep. An angel comes and urges him on – providing hot cakes and water, the angel prepares him for the journey that lies ahead: a forty day and forty night trek to the mount of God, where we now find him hiding in a cave.

And the Lord asks, “What are you doing here Elijah?”

Elijah explains what God already knows. All this hard stuff has happened and he feels alone.

And God says, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then there is a great wind, an earthquake, fire and then the sound of silence.

Elijah hears the silence and goes to the entrance of the cave and he hears the voice of the Lord, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And once again Elijah explains what God already knows, “I have been zealous for the Lord, but the people have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets. I am alone and they are seeking to take my life.” And God speaks “Go, return on your way...” God explains to Elijah the storms that still lie ahead and his job in the midst of them. And Elijah carries on.

I find Elijah relatable. The storms, the turmoil seems endless. Exhausted, overwhelmed, traumatized, afraid...trudging ahead feels impossible sometimes. “Oh God, it is enough...” We just want to sleep and make all our fears go away.

God provides that Elijah might make the 40 day journey to the mount of God. Why? When Elijah arrives at the cave God asks, "What are you doing here Elijah?" Why the forty day and forty night journey? God continues, "Go stand out on the mountain for the Lord is about to pass by." Why stand on the mountain? God is already speaking to Elijah. And even when he stands on the mountain God passes by with the same words, "What are you doing here Elijah?" It appears Elijah has only come to this place to be sent back, "Go, return on your way..."

God knows Elijah's response to the storms. God knows Elijah needs the forty day and forty night trek to the Mount of God. God knows Elijah needs the time to stand on the mountain and wait for the Lord. While the journey and the act of standing on the mountain seem pointless because it only leads Elijah back into life's storms, those moments are the points in which Elijah remembers he is not alone. It is in that intentional time of trekking with and waiting for the Lord that Elijah discovers he can return to the earthly storms; his life will go on.

While Elijah is in that cave, waiting, knowing that the Lord has sent him to that place and knowing that the Lord is coming, the text does not mention Elijah being afraid or having any response to the storms that blow through. The great wind, so strong that it splits mountains, an earthquake, and fire, draw no response from Elijah, he only waits and when the Lord comes in the silence he recognizes God with him, just as God has always been.

In our New Testament Gospel reading today we enter into another storm. The disciples have just heard the news that John the Baptist has been beheaded. Instead of taking time to grieve, Jesus asks them to feed 5,000 people. Jesus has now sent them ahead in a boat to the other side where the crowds will bring them their sick and possessed for healing, where the Sadducees and Pharisees wait with questions and trials, and where Jesus will tell them of the cross to come. Before joining them, Jesus dismisses the crowd and goes up the mountain by himself to pray. Even Jesus benefited from a trek to the mount to wait for the Lord to pass by.

In the meantime, a storm has kicked up and the disciples' boat is far from the land and being battered and swamped by the winds and the rains. Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water and they are terrified. Storms and now ghosts. They do not recognize Jesus' presence. But Jesus speaks, "Take heart, here I am; do not be afraid." And in quite the opposite reaction of Elijah's resigned giving up and shutting down in the wilderness, Peter enthusiastically jumps out of the boat and into the sea. And while Peter takes his first few steps successfully, he notices the storm, the wind, the waves, and his fear overtakes him. "Lord save me!" And Jesus does – reaching out his hand and returning him safely to the boat.

And while Jesus calms the storm on the water, they head into the storms awaiting them on the shore. But the disciples proclaim with newfound assurance, "Truly you are the Son of God."

While Elijah waits through the storms to recognize God in the silence, Peter jumps into the storm seeing Jesus amidst the waves. But both were unable to carry on without hearing a word from God.

Our Psalm today reads “I will listen to what the Lord God is saying: for you speak peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you”.

There is so much in our texts for today, so many ways they may be speaking a word to us today, but here are the three things I hope you can hear:

1. God does not leave us alone in the storms

God was with Elijah the whole time. God was there giving him knowledge of the expected drought, there enabling the miracles bringing food and new life, there giving him strength as he stood against the powerful, there providing signs and wonders during the challenge, there in Elijah’s sorrow amidst the slain, there as the threats on his life were whispered in his ears. God was there as he lay depleted in the wilderness. God was there giving him strength for his forty day journey, there as he waited in the cave, there to send him forth. There as he returned to a storm-filled world.

God was there as the disciples grieved John and there as the 5,000 were fed. God was there in the boat before Jesus walked across the waves. There as the waters began to swamp the boat. There in Peter’s moments of boldness and there as his feet began to sink into the seas. God was there in the doubt and there in the calm of the seas and within the profession of faith. There as they reached the shores and the journey that lay ahead.

God stands with us before, within and beyond the internal and external storms.

2. God knows and meets us in our response to the storms

God sees Elijah’s exhaustion and despair. God meets Elijah in his wilderness. He sends an angel to sit beside him as he sleeps. God provides food and water, renewing his physical strength to carry on. God provides a forty day journey, drawing him to the mountain of God to strengthen his spirit. God keeps speaking when at first Elijah can’t hear God’s reassurance. Elijah experiences the ability to make it through wind, earthquake and fire, while knowing that God’s presence will come. God provides a moment of silence to ready Elijah to move into the storms ahead.

God meets Peter in his enthusiasm, in his rash attempts to conquer the storms. Jesus reaches out his hand and saves Peter when his own attempts to manage the waves fail. God is patient with Peter’s limited faith and surrender to fear. Jesus puts him back in the boat.

Whatever our response to the storms that brew around and within us – God knows and meets us where we are.

3. Finally, God longs to speak and be peace amidst our storms.

God takes Elijah on a 40 day trek, up a mountain to provide him a moment of silent reassurance.

Jesus takes Peter's hand.

God works to provide us peace.

In today's text we see Jesus, the divine wrapped in flesh – living in the storms of this earthly life. We can learn from him. Following the death of John and the teaching and feeding of the multitude and prior to the storm on the sea and the crowds that wait on the opposing shore, Jesus takes time to go up the mountain and dwell in God's presence and peace.

Our reading from Romans today says, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

The storms will rage on. They will deplete you and leave you feeling alone and frightened. Even in the moments when you feel like you have them under control, they will sneak up on you and threaten to take you under. We do not draw hope from believing the storms will end – we have faith that amidst the storm God does not abandon, but rather meets us where we stand in the raging waters and promises God's peace – a peace that surpasses all understanding and exceeds any storm.

Make a moment to hear the word of God.

Whether you find yourself this day as Elijah laying in the wilderness crying out, "Oh Lord it is enough..." or as Peter, "Lord, I got this, here I come..." know that God is with you. God knows the conditions of your internal and external storms and is determined to bring you God's peace whether in the silence or in response to your cry, "Lord save me!" May you "Go and return on your way..." finding peace in the promise of our God who is more fierce than any storm. Make time to listen to what the Lord is saying: "Take heart, here I am; do not be afraid."