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# GRACEWORKS

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19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY of Ordinary Time—CYCLE A

## THE WHISPER BEYOND THE WIND

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

The stories of Elijah's standing on the mountain and St. Peter's walking on the sea are for many – and may be for you – the most riveting stories in the Bible. In both, men face God and face their fears and in so doing, discover new strength. How so?

First, there's Elijah, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, hiding in a cave. Why is he there? What's going on? Here's what happened. Just a few days earlier, Elijah stood on top of Mount Carmel with the prophets of the pagan god Baal as they both called on their deities to consume a sacrifice on an altar. There, on the top of mount Carmel, kissed by a Mediterranean vista, the prophets of Baal prayed, danced, sang, even cut themselves with knives begging silent gods to accept their offering, all to no avail. Elijah taunts them without mercy, telling them their deities are mute, impotent, worthless.

At the end of the day, as the pagan prophets limp away from their performance, Elijah prays asking the Lord God to accept his offering. With thunderous terror, fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering on the altar. Swift, summary judgment follows. Elijah orders the people to seize the prophets of Baal and slaughter them to the last man. You would think that would be the end of the story. But it's not. Dutifully, King Ahab reports back to Queen Jezebel, a devotee of Baal, all that Elijah had done. Hearing that her fawning priests are dead, the queen puts a contract out on the prophet, vowing to take his life.

What did the Elijah do? He did what you and I would do: he ran for his life. But this was not just any run. Elijah ran from Mount Carmel on the northwestern Mediterranean coast some 90 miles south to Beersheba, an isolated oasis in the desert of Judah. There, he licks his ego's wounds, sits down under a broom tree, and has a pity party. He stays there for some time until an angel brings him food and water. He sleeps. He rises a second day, eats some more, and travels to this cave where we find him, hiding out in fear, believing he's the last of God's true believers left on the planet.

He speaks. He tells God how faithful he has been and how awful God's people are. God listens until at last God summons him to walk out of that cave “and stand on the mountain in the

presence of the Lord.” There, the Lord passes by in awesome majesty. The mountains part, the rocks shatter, the wind howls, but Elijah does not meet the Lord in hewn mountains, crumbled rock, or bleating wind. Then comes an earthquake followed by fire. But again, God is not in the quaking of the earth or the crackling of fire. At last there comes “a gentle whisper.” Finally, at last, Elijah senses God’s presence, covers his face with his cloak, and stands before the Lord Almighty who gives to the prophet a new assignment and with it, a new destiny.

Now let’s jump over 700 years of history to the story from today’s gospel reading. You know it from childhood: Seeing Jesus walking on the water, Simon Peter steps out of the boat and walks on the stormy sea until he takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink. Going down like a rock, Jesus reaches out his hand to Peter and together, they step back into the boat. Immediately, angry winds subside, the disciples worship our Lord; all is well.

Or is it? I’m not sure. When I was taught this story in my younger years, I remember a twist that’s not in our reading. I was told – weren’t you? – that Peter looked down at the waves and sank because he took his eyes off of Jesus. That makes for great storytelling, but here’s what the text says: “But when [Peter] saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” The big fisherman began to sink, not when he looked down at the waves, but when he looked past our Lord and saw the wind. Here’s another story and maybe on its other side, another way of doing life.

Don’t misunderstand me. I know the fear that haunts Simon Peter quite well – it lives in all of us. In fact, that same fear stalked the prophet Elijah. Elijah, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, the man who stared down King Ahab and spoke summary judgment upon the vile Queen Jezebel, cowers in a cave, shivers in the cold, lost in a self-imposed exile that has him ground down to fine powder. What happened? Like Peter, the prophet looked past the Lord seeing only the fierce wind of Jezebel’s threats, shattered rocks, and dancing fire.

What is God saying to us who find ourselves somewhere in these two riveting stories? For one thing, life today has all manner of death-dealing threats just as it did when Elijah cowered in that cave and Peter sank in the sea. The Bible never minimizes or soft-pedals the realities of spiritual evil, physical danger, or natural disasters. One day we will all have an appointment with tragedy, a tsunami of pain, and yes, death, which we will not be able to cancel or reschedule. People will hurt us, disease will infect us, disappointment will wound us, death will visit us. Jezebel has many sons and daughters; the stormy sea still rages without warning.

We find the good news both in our stories and in life in the presence of the One who loves us, who never abandons us to our worse fears. As God came to Elijah on that mountain, as our Lord walked on an angry sea to lift Peter from certain death, so God in Christ comes to us in whispered love and outstretched hand. There are times when, in absolute trust, we keep our eyes on the Lord and stare down evil. We walk on water and amaze ourselves and others. Other times, we find ourselves pummeled by our fears, sinking in our doubts. But at every turn, in all times, God is there: God speaks our name, whispers assurance, and summons us to new and renewing work.

And yes, at the end, God called both Elijah and Peter to even more important work than before. Elijah found the younger Elisha, who became his star pupil and towering successor. And Peter? Well Peter became our Lord’s number one disciple in spite of his own failings. Even Peter’s cowardice and denial could not keep the risen Lord from finding him and recalling him to greater work. My friend, the winds will and do howl, the earth shakes. But what good news: there’s a whisper beyond the wind inviting us to live more fully in God’s presence. Amen.