

Proper 14, Year A, 2023; 13 August 2023

1 Kings 19.9-18, Ps. 85.8-13, Romans 10.5-15, Matthew 14.22-33

Where does one encounter God? Where do we encounter God? Today's reading from the 1 Book of Kings suggests in unexpected places. For Elijah the encounter was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the silence. What sort of silence is this? It isn't a silence of nothingness. Is it the silence when all the striving has ceased? When we know God is and we are. We are made in his image and likeness. We are made male and female. Sometimes we must stop and listen for God in "the still small voice of calm", but not only there. Or is it possibly uncreated silence. All that is created dwells with the uncreated silence of God? God is also found in the act of liberation, the transition from oppression to liberty that we summarily call the Exodus.

Recall for a moment what constitutes the people of Israel. It is in large part their liberation from bondage under Pharaoh to freedom in the promised land, where through much trial and error they learn to be a free people under God. In Egypt the Hebrew people come to have a shared experience as their number increases. Their bondage begins, we are informed, when a new pharaoh rises to the throne, 'who did not know Joseph'. (Exodus 1:8) Each time I hear the pithy phrase, 'who did not know Joseph' I am reminded of our need for the society in which we live not only to remember Jesus, but also come to know him, otherwise we too may find ourselves enslaved with fear for our livelihoods, our reputations, our beliefs and our values to name a few. The Exodus is an event that is commemorated in Jewish households at Passover and which we recall at Easter for Jesus will pass through death and make himself known alive in eternity. Even death could not hold him, the vanquisher of sin.

The above musings including my touching on fear take me to today's gospel 'The Stilling of the Sea', and it is characterized by encounter. It is helpful in this context to know that the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains rising to about 2,000 ft on both the east and on the west. Why is it helpful to know this? It is helpful because the wind at the Sea of Galilee often blowing in from the Mediterranean is funnelled through the ravines that lie between the mountains.

The funnelling of the wind increases the force of the wind and its impact on the sea by whipping up the water into sometimes treacherous waves. In Matthew's account the waves are in fact being whipped up by the wind. The boat in which the disciples are crossing the sea is being tossed about, but in Matthew's account the boat is **not** about to sink. The emphasis is elsewhere. It is initially on the vision, the disciples' reaction to the vision and Jesus' response inviting to consider faith.

It is while the boat is being tossed about that those in the boat see Jesus coming towards them. Jesus had asked the disciples earlier to go before him, so that he could make time for solitary prayer. Words from Psalm 4 come to mind, 'Commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still. ... and put your trust in the Lord.' (Psalm 4.4, 5 BCP, 1662, Great Bible, Coverdale, 1538). Again we see Jesus at prayer that we might be encouraged in our prayer lives.

Here **on** the lake Jesus goes towards them to rejoin those who are sent to go on ahead. In the resurrection Jesus will again send the disciples ahead of him to Galilee. (Mt. 28.7) Today's encounter as told is a ghostly vision. 'It is a ghost! 'It is a phantom!' In Greek 'Φάντασμα ἐστίν' (phantasma estin)! The disciples' reaction is to be terrified not of the boat being tossed about, but of seeing Jesus on the lake, not beside the lake, near the lake or close to the lake, but on the lake. Their being terrified is met by assurance. Jesus says to them, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' (Mt 14.27)

Before proceeding I must link back to last Sunday and our keeping of the Feast of the Transfiguration (Mt. 17.1-8). There too we see in Matthew's account the disciples terrified and afraid. There too Jesus not only comes to them, but also touches them saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' Today he says, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' A believer can take much strength for continuing in the Way from these encounters and their accompanying dominical words. We only need a few words of encouragement, especially if they are words from our Lord. Words spoken that we as disciples should hear as being spoken to us.

Who might we encourage today I wonder, when we get home, during the week at work or at play amongst colleagues, friends and family, not only on their life's journey, but also in the way of faith. The author of the letter to Jude writes in a similar vein,

'Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.' (Jude 3)

We often gloss over the first part of the 'Stilling of the Sea', because we move on too quickly driven by Peter's compulsiveness. His eagerness. But I would want us to treasure that even though Jesus has told the disciples to go on ahead of him, he does rejoin them and through the unfolding of this encounter assures them and thereby encourages them, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Let us treasure the initial encounter in today's gospel, while remembering that their separation was necessary so that Jesus could have time for solitary prayer.

But there is Peter's compulsiveness, who has responded to the dominical words as words of encouragement. Peter wants to join Jesus on the lake. His compulsiveness, I imagine, is like that of a child. Call to mind those times when you desperately wanted to join in, although you may have not had the skill set, the ability, the nous or the strength, and possibly embarrassed yourself. Peter asks Jesus to command him, to order him to come to him. Jesus obliges. He says simply, 'Come.' Peter sets out, but then notices the strong wind whipping up the waves again.

We can imagine the scene. For a time the wind has died down. There is a lull. It feels safe. But the wind picks up again and Peter can see the waves ahead of him being whipped up once more. He is terrified a second time. He loses it. He is frightened. Being frightened he begins to sink. Again he calls to Jesus, 'Lord save, me!' Without delay, immediately, Jesus reaches out and catches him and is compelled to say to Peter, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt'.

Halt. Stop. Arresto. Here are dominical words to consider. The interpretation will depend on where we put the emphasis and by ensuring the words addressed to

Peter are not brushed aside, who down the ages and today is a prototype of many a disciple and from whom all can learn. I offer an interpretation. Peter the Apostle is like many Christians. He is a person of little faith, but what is implied here (my emphasis), even with a little faith, being a person of little faith, we can walk with Jesus, if we follow his lead and keep his commandment. 'This is my commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you.' (John 15:13) Most of us probably won't ask Jesus to walk on water, although it would be cool. (I think our grandsons might, Noah 4 1/2 and Finn 3 plus, having visited a fair in Hamburg a few weeks ago, the Dom and this week the Tivoli in Copenhagen. Might like a ride enabling "Walking on water") But many of us will make a much more important and faith plea, namely we be given the heart, the soul, the mind, the strength and the grace to walk through life well in Christ, in God and that in the silence of encounter in prayer we might hear God, knowing sin vanquished and death conquered and that we might also in our daily liberation through God's Holy Spirit to life, freedom and flourishing we might also encounter this God in unexpected places.

Come is a Matthean word. We hear it most Sundays at one of our Sunday services. "Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you." (Matthew 11.28) And today we have come to be refreshed. We are being refreshed by being gathered in His name, by being present to one another in His name, by hearing Biblical words, by acknowledging our sins and the seriousness of that sin, by affirming our apostolic faith, by making time for intercessory prayer, by being gathered around his table, by being invited by Him, who spreads a table before us. Draw near with faith and receive. Come near with faith and receive. Are we stirred? Yes! Will we falter? In Christ, we pray not. The episode ends on a high point with those in the boat worshipping and acclaiming Jesus, 'Truly you are the Son of God!' We remember that Peter is with them in the boat once again, even though he faltered. He too with the others worships and acclaims, 'Truly you are the Son of God'. Come let us join this in the acclamation and say with them, 'Truly you are the Son of God!' Ready, 'Truly you are the Son of God!'