

**Texts: 1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-23**

**“After Jesus dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.”**

**That small detail often gets missed in this morning’s Gospel reading. The more spectacular part is Jesus walking across the Sea of Galilee. We like spectacle. We like Jesus to be a miracle worker, like last week when he fed 5,000 people. We like Jesus to be an action hero. Walking on water fits that picture. Solitary prayer on the mountain doesn’t.**

**Many people who encountered Jesus during his life on earth compared him to the prophet Elijah. They even wondered if he might be Elijah reincarnated. That is because Elijah was an action hero, a swashbuckler. He was the mightiest of prophets, a man of God, who could work amazing signs and wonders.**

**But in this morning’s passage from 1 Kings, we get quite a different picture of Elijah. This morning, Elijah is at the end of his rope. He is on the run from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They are looking everywhere for him and have threatened to kill him when they find him. Elijah has escaped into the wilderness. He has been fed by an angel and on the strength of that little bit of food, he has walked for 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.**

**Forty is that Biblical number that is always associated with wandering, with the wilderness, with temptation and threat. Elijah has been wandering in the wilderness and now he climbs Mount Horeb, to demand an answer. All the literary signs in this passage point to a comparison with Moses.**

**Moses and Elijah are both given special places in Israel’s story. They were both men who stood before God and were able to work signs and wonders in God’s name. Just as Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights talking with God on Mount Sinai, Elijah walks for 40**

**days and 40 nights to talk with God on the same mountain. Mount Horeb and Mount Sinai are two Biblical names for the same mountain, the mountain of God.**

**Back in the book of Exodus, Moses is given a peek at God's glory from a cleft of rock on the mountain. Here in today's reading, Elijah also waits for God in a small cave on the mountain. Like Moses, Elijah is given the privilege of talking to God up close.**

**When we think of Moses, we usually picture Charlton Heston lifting the stone tablets above his head, with his hair and beard whipped by the wind as the lightning strikes and the earthquake rumbles. When we think of Elijah, we may picture the scene from later in the story in which a chariot and horses of fire descend to the earth to carry him up to heaven in a whirlwind.**

**And when we think of a scene on a mountaintop, we do think of Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain. Both Moses and Elijah both appeared before them, and Jesus' face and clothing became dazzling white. In that scene, Moses stood for "the Law" and Elijah represented "the Prophets," the books of Jewish scripture that Jesus, Paul and all the devout Jews read and studied. For Matthew, Jesus was the one who came to fulfill the law, to complete the work of the prophets. He was God's own wisdom, God's own word.**

**What is it about that mountaintop experience?**

**In today's passage, God instructs Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain, and then God sends every kind of natural disaster God can muster to try to get a rise out of him. There is wind so strong it breaks rocks. There is an earthquake. There is the fire of lightning. But the writer is careful to point out that God does not inhabit these spectacles.**

**They are examples of God’s power, but they are not God. We do not worship wind or thunder or earthquakes or fire.**

**Elijah knows that God is not in the storm. And so he simply waits for God to speak. Finally, the quiet following the bluster, he knows that God is present.**

**The phrase “a sound of sheer silence” is not quite accurate. The Hebrew words make it clear that there is a voice in the quietness. The King James Version calls it “a still, small voice.” Other translations read, “a gentle whisper.” Only when he hears that whisper does Elijah come out of the cave to stand before the Lord. And God asks Elijah the simplest of questions. As if God didn’t already know the answer.**

**- What are you doing here, Elijah?**

**- I have been your zealous servant, but everyone else has rejected you. I am the only one who has kept the faith, and now I am running for my life.**

**- What are you doing here, Elijah?**

**- I am really sick and tired of all this conflict. I am tired of running from Ahab and Jezebel. I feel like a failure. I wanted just to lie down and die but you won’t let me. Your angel made me eat. I have been walking for 40 days and 40 nights to get here.**

**- What are you doing here, Elijah?**

**- I am looking for you, Lord. I am a failure. I want to hear your voice. I am afraid for my life. I have been abandoned.**

**We know how Elijah feels. There are times of self-justification when we would like a little thanks and praise for everything we have done. “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. I could use a little affirmation, here, God.”**

**There are times of questioning doubt when nothing seems to make sense anymore and we really have no idea what we are going to do next. “The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets. Where are you, God? Come down here and show yourself to me.”**

**There are times when we feel abandoned and alone, persecuted, at the end of our rope. “I alone am left, and they are seeking my life. Show me you are on my side, God.”**

**What are you doing here? Are you looking for a mountaintop experience?**

**But what if God doesn’t show up in the way that you wanted? What if God doesn’t show you God’s face? What if God takes the form of a still, small voice, whispering out of the sheer silence?**

**We live in a noisy world. There are very few places left where you can go and not hear any human-made sound. That’s one of the things I love about living here is that there are those places. But we also seem to be afraid of silence. How many of you keep a TV on during the day? How many of you put your earbuds in when you work out or walk somewhere? How many of you drive everywhere with the radio or your iPod on?**

**The thing about silence, for me, is that once you stop talking, you begin listening. And looking, and smelling and feeling. You notice things with all your senses.**

**So let’s try it this morning. Here we are, outdoors in our garden of prayer. And I invite you for the next two minutes to simply sit, to simply notice. [ ]**

**What did you hear? [birds, lawn mowers, traffic]**

**What did you feel? [sun, breeze]**

**What did you see? [green trees, shadows, light]**

**What did you smell? [sweetness of the air, earthiness of the ground]**

**There is something else that I know you heard and felt, but that you may not have mentioned: the sound and feeling of your own breathing – inhale and exhale. That is the breath of life in you. That is God’s own Spirit that lives in you.**

**We are often like those first Christians who first heard this gospel story. We like Jesus to be our action hero who shows up and gets things done. And this week’s and last week’s gospels seem to portray him that way – feeding 5,000 people, walking across a stormy ocean. But Jesus knew what lay behind his miracle working power: Prayer. That is the essence of his connection to God the Father. And you have the same connection through prayer – especially when you sit in quietness to listen for the still, small voice.**

**Elijah didn’t get any answer to his complaint. All he got were more instructions: “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” Go, says God, and do what I instruct you to do. And Elijah went. Back down the mountain, back to the conflict with Ahab and Jezebel, back to the job of being a prophet. And in the very next scene, he finds Elisha, and calls him from the plowing to come be a prophet, to be Elijah’s successor. Life goes on. Work goes on. Relationships continue and new ones are formed.**

**God’s work is not found up there on the mountaintop, but down here in the wilderness of our daily lives, down here in the Damascus of our jobs and relationships, down here in the company of others who have not bowed down to false gods, and even in the company of those who have. Down here on earth, in the messiness and the muck of going to work, going to school, trying to find time for a family meal, wondering how to pay the bills, tending to an aging parent.**

**I like what the theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote about God’s presence: Many people long for some kind of religious emotion that can “lift me off my hinges, grip me like**

a storm, fell me completely...something that is stronger than I. But God can become my Lord only when he is with me in the hundreds of little things which make up my life.” God may very well be present on the mountaintop in the wind and the earthquake and the fire, but if God is not present in your kitchen when you cook, or in the car when you drive, or in the bathroom as you brush my teeth or in your child’s 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom, then God cannot be the Heart that really knows you, the One with whom you can talk.

That is why on Thursday we are inviting new college students and their families to each lunch here after they move into their dorm rooms. So that we can be reminded that God is everywhere – in a dorm room and a classroom and a church kitchen. God is with you to school, with you in the office, with you at the campground, and with you as you go back home, too. God is not just here in church, in this sanctuary, but walking beside you in every place you go.

And that is the nature of prayer – finding the place where God’s voice can be heard; finding a place of stillness in the midst of the noise, the bustle and the business. Jesus knew this and that is why he prayed on a mountaintop. His life of prayer was connected to his power to do miraculous things.

Our prayers connect us to God as well. Life goes on. Work goes on. Relationships continue and new ones are formed. And God is with us. In the noise and in the stillness. God is with us in all we do, on top of the mountain and at the bottom.