

Homily - 19th Sunday in Ord. Time, Year A
St. Monica's Parish: August 10, 2014

I Kings 19:9-13 The presence of God: not in whirlwind, fire, or earthquake, but "in a sound of sheer silence."

Psalms 85: Lord, show us your mercy and love.

Romans 9:1-5 Paul's love for his people Israel, to whom belong the adoption, glory, Law, Covenant, worship, promises, Messiah.

Matthew 14:22-33 "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." "Lord, save me!" "Man of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Many years ago, I watched a PBS documentary on the civil rights struggle of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. Its title, taken from the words of an old Negro Spiritual, was "**Keep your eyes on the prize!**" Keep your eyes on the prize – even when all hope seems to be gone. Keep your eyes on the prize – even when your friends and family have deserted you, are in jail, are dead. Keep your eyes on the prize – because only then will you stand firm in the storm that is raging about you. Keep your eyes on the prize – because only then will you have the perseverance to run the race, fight the good fight, be worthy of the reward that awaits you.

Good advice! We see it operative in today's Gospel, in this exquisite encounter on the Sea of Galilee between Jesus and Peter. It's been quite the day for the disciples – and for Jesus. They have just received very sad news: John the Baptist, whom many of them had followed before they became Jesus' disciples, has been savagely executed by Herod. Devastating news for Jesus and his friends; but just as they get away somewhere quiet, they find that the crowds have followed them. Jesus puts his own troubles aside and, with great compassion, heals and teaches the crowds. By the end of the day, they were getting hungry – and Jesus was now expecting the disciples to do something about it! And somehow, with Jesus, they did.

Finally, Jesus goes off into the hills to pray by himself, and sends his disciples in the boat over to the other side of the lake. How were they feeling at this point? Tired, for sure; impressed by the wondrous deeds of the day, probably; feeling abandoned by Jesus, perhaps. Then a storm starts to blow up and here they are, alone, in the boat. In the midst of their storm, Jesus comes walking toward them on the waters.

If you who have ever prayed imaginatively with Scripture, you can compose the scene: the salty wind, the cold driving rain, the darkness, the waves, loud shouts and curses of frightened companions. I remember vividly the moment I prayed with this passage, when I made the Ignatian Exercises over 20 years ago. Taking on the role of Peter, I heard Jesus bid me to come to him on the waters, saw him stretch out his hands towards me. And I couldn't do it. Try though I might, I was afraid of the storm, the deep waters; I was afraid of drowning. (In fact, I still panic in deep water, unless I have a life jacket.) My trust in Jesus was not yet strong enough to overcome the fear that kept both feet planted firmly in the boat. One of the wise things about the Exercises is that you don't get to move on until you have received the corresponding grace, so for several days I repeated the prayer experience, until at last, I was able to get out of the boat, and hesitatingly make my way across the waves to Jesus.

What I learned from that experience was that as long as I kept my focus clearly on Jesus – when I kept my “eyes on the prize”, if you will – I was able to keep going. Sometimes unsteadily, often stumbling ... but I kept going. It was when I lost my focus, when I stared down at the water, when all I could see was the storm – my own fears, my insecurities, my excuses for not following Jesus – it was then that I began to sink. But I learned that even when that happened – and being human and frail, it inevitably does – I could still call out, “Lord, save me!” as Peter did, and immediately Jesus would stretch out his hand. After one of these experiences, I felt the Lord lift me up, set me on solid ground, and say “Any time you fall, I will lift you up. But I want you to develop your sea legs. I want you to be able to walk upright in the storm, trusting that I am with you. **Courage, it is I! Do not be afraid!**”

Especially at difficult and stormy moments of my life, I go back to that text, and it gives me strength. It does so because it reminds me that although storms are whirling around me – some external and beyond my control, others more internal, and sometimes very much of my own creation – there is more to life than the storm. Although God can be encountered anywhere – even in the midst of the storm – God is not the storm.

This is what Elijah learns in the first reading today. Just before this text, in one of the bloodiest passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, Elijah has won his great triumph over the priests of Baal: in a “my God is bigger than your God” battle, Elijah calls down fire from heaven, defeating the self-gashing priests of Baal with their spells and incantations. Elijah “wins” the battle – but his life threatened by the Queen Jezebel, he is forced to flee into the wilderness. Today, we meet Elijah on the mountain: for the people of Israel, the place where the Lord traditionally reveals himself. God shows himself not in whirlwinds, earthquakes, or great conflagrations. *“After the fire, there was a sound of sheer silence.”* And this was the place where God finally revealed himself to Elijah.

Yes, God is present to us, even in the midst of the storms of life – perhaps especially there. At moments of death, illness, the loss of a job, the breakdown of a relationship, the departure of a friend, God finds some way to let us know that He is still there, that He has not abandoned us, that we are still precious in His sight. He says to us “Courage, it is I! Do not be afraid!”

But in order to meet him there, we also need to make space in our lives for those moments of “sheer silence” in which the Lord reveals his presence to us. If you want to “keep your eyes on the prize,” you have to know what the prize is, be able to recognize it in the midst of distractions, be ready to get over or around the obstacles that stand between you and it. If the prize for us is that intimate and personal relationship with Jesus, we need to nourish that friendship in prayer, encountering Jesus in silent communion, so that when the storm blows up again – as it inevitably does – we will know who to turn to, we will recognize him however he decided to come to us – even looking like a ghost, even doing something so utterly unexpected as walking on the water.

In perhaps the best book on the priesthood I have ever read, Fr. Michael Heher describes Christian life and ministry as “the lost art of walking on water”:

“I return again to Peter. Yes, he is knocked about by enormous waves and the winds rage around him; he knows the times are desperate. But from these he is distracted momentarily by the reassuring face of Jesus. He knows his own frailty, for he will be quick to accept the rescuing hand of his Savior, glad to have hold of it.” (172)

“One of Vatican II’s dreams was to renew parishes with holiness strong and plentiful enough to sustain the life of the Spirit in our neighborhoods and within our cities. The hope was to build parishes filled with saints and martyrs, faith-filled witnesses capable of reviving among us this lost art of walking on water.” (173)

“We’ve heard the story so often, we automatically jump to the ending. But wait. Go back. Look. See those stunning moments when Peter stood there on his own. One like us actually did walk on water. And if it’s been done once, it can be done again. Could it be that turbulent waters are indeed the best suited for walking? With our eyes on Christ, I believe the whole church can find the faith we need. And when, as is likely, we do tumble in, we’ll find his saving hand grasping ours, as Peter did.” (175)

So in these lazy summer weeks, let us slow down from all our activity and, like Elijah, meet God in the quiet breeze, the sound of silence. Let us “hear what God has to say: a voice that speaks peace to his people. Steadfast love and faithfulness shall meet; righteousness and peace shall embrace.” Let us be attentive to the voice of Jesus, calling out to each of us by name: “**Courage, it is I! Do not be afraid!**” You may even find yourself, to your great surprise, doing what you could never have imagined possible: walking on water.