

Rev. Lynne Ogren
August 5 & 9, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14: 22-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Over the past several months, or weeks, or even days, have you felt like Elijah—afraid and isolated from God and from the world? In Matthew’s gospel the Twelve Disciples can represent the Christian Church. As a leader in the church I have felt the rocking of the waves of this pandemic storm and I have felt lost and afraid at times, too.

In both stories, fear has taken over and the way forward is unclear. It is hard to recognize God when our vision is clouded with anxiety for our unknown future.

The story of Elijah on the mountain is a story that always intrigues me. Inasmuch as God created the forces of the world, including wind and earthquakes and fire, God is not found in any of these for Elijah.

This passage begins with Elijah hiding from the threats of others. We face various threats in our world today—some more global and systemic, and some more personal and close to home.

When the going gets tough our instinct, like Elijah, is to retreat—not a holy, spiritual retreat, but more like a military retreat. We hide away, avoid, and hope the threats of the world might not find us. But we cannot hide from God. “What are you doing here?” God asks Elijah.

Elijah replies with a pitiful speech. It reminds me of the old children’s song—Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I think I’ll go eat worms! And God responds by calling him out of hiding.

If we were on that mountain, it might look something like this:

- Now there was a great virus that spread from nation to nation all around the world. But God was not in the virus.
- And after the virus came an upheaval of racial tension in the land. Centuries of hurt and distrust exploded into marches and riots and vandalism. But God was not in the violence.
- And after the violence came a swarm of grasshoppers to ranches and farms, hurricanes and tornadoes devoured the eastern coastline, and wildfires scorched the land near and far. But God was not in the disasters.

And after the disasters—“a sound of sheer silence.” *Wait*

It was the silence that caught Elijah’s attention. We are so easily consumed with the storms around us. Stormy relationships, financial worries out of control, the confusion and turmoil of illness, or major changes in our lives and in the world make it difficult to notice the presence of God.

When I taught school one of the tricks I used was to speak very softly, especially when the room had gotten loud with activity and the children's voices. As I whispered an instruction, those who were closest were often surprised by the difference in my tone. They paid attention and followed the direction. As each student sat down or held up their hand or whatever I had asked them to do, the room began to quiet down and others were able to hear me and follow along.

Silence is surprising in a world of noise and busyness. As much as God could have knocked Elijah off his feet with the wind or the earthquake or the fire, instead God created a moment of silence.

Once again, our Old Testament reading is paired so well with the gospel text. We are told that God was not in the storms that passed by Elijah, but for the disciples on the stormy sea, Jesus entered into the storm. There is no mention that Jesus caused the storm. He was not of the storm. Jesus cut through the storm, and the wind and the waves only calmed down when Jesus finally got into the boat with Peter and the other disciples.

Some like to say that "everything happens for a reason" or that God sends the storms in life to test or punish or to wake us up. These stories remind us that the storms of life happen for a variety of reasons—from broken relationships to the natural ways of Creation's forces. Storms happen.

Today, we see how God makes a way through the storms to bring us a word of instruction or hope or even salvation.

I have wondered if this moment in time we are experiencing now, especially in the life of the church, is a moment in which we might pay attention to God's word for us. Many churches around the country are still not worshipping together. And even though we are, there are many who are unable to attend in person.

We are preparing for programs to begin again in the fall, but we don't know what attendance will be like for our Bible study groups, Sunday School, or youth programs.

Perhaps this is a time for us to stop and look to God to lead us through the storms around us.

How might we answer God's question that he asks of Elijah twice, "What are you doing here?"

What is Zion Lutheran Church doing here? Are we seeking God's guidance or are we hiding out until one storm or another passes by? What is the work God is giving us to do?

In the case of the disciples, Jesus embodied the word of God when he said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid...Come [to me.]" Jesus transformed their fear into faith that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. In Elijah's case, God sends him back to finish the work God had given him to do.

How have you experienced the presence of God amidst the storms lately?

How might we as a congregation pay better attention to God's instruction for the ministry Zion Lutheran has been given to do in this time and place?

How has faith been strained or strengthened, especially in these last few months?

Our church council would like to hear your thoughts and experiences based on these questions. We will be going out to some of the neighborhoods in and around town after worship today to visit with you on your front porches.

We would like to hear about your fears or your faith in these trying times, and how we as a congregation might better follow Jesus into and through these uncertain times.

Perhaps one way we can all attend to these questions is to make time to be silent once in a while. Turn off the radio in the car. Sit out on the porch for a few minutes each day without a book or a newspaper or a phone. Or take a few more minutes before getting out of bed in the morning—and listen. Listen with your ears. Listen with your heart.

May these moments of silence fill you with the strength and the faith you need to hear and follow God in and through each new storm.

Take heart. God is with us. Do not be afraid.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of God's care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Mighty God, we pray for your whole church throughout the world. Give courage in the midst of storms, so that we see and hear Jesus calling: "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." May we follow Christ wherever he leads. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Creator of All, we pray for the well-being of your creation. Protect waterways, forests, lands, and wildlife from the storms and forces of nature, as well as our own exploitation and abuse. Help the human family endeavor to sustain and be sustained by the resources of your hand. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Holy God, we pray for the nations and their leaders. In you, steadfast love and faithfulness meet, and righteousness and peace kiss. May nations in conflict know the peace that is the fruit of justice, and the justice that is the path to peace. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Loving Father, we pray for those in need. Everyone who calls upon your name will be saved. Accompany all who are lonely, hear the voices of those who cry out in anguish, and support those who are frustrated in their search for adequate work and safe housing. We pray for those suffering this day. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Spirit of the Living God, we pray for our congregation. You have gathered us today as your people and we thank you for this gift. We pray for our council as they visit some of our members today that we would be led into your promised future as a congregation. Supply us generously with your grace for our life together. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you, O God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.