



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, August 13, 2017

*The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost*

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1 Kings 19:9-18 | Psalm 85:8-13 | Romans 10:5-15 | Matthew 14:22-33

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts together // Be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

“Where is God in all of this?” is a question we ask, most often when trouble strikes or danger mounts: a broken heart, a dire diagnosis, a lost job. We ask it when disasters happen: floods, earthquakes, wildfires. We even ask it when it’s clear that people, not God, are the cause of the trouble or danger: when careless braggadocio raises the risk of nuclear annihilation, or when hate acts and speech unleash terror and end in murder. We find it hard to see God because we somehow still cling to the nursery story that because God is love, everything is sunshine and happiness where God is. That’s a fairy story, not the biblical record: what the Bible offers is the presence of God in the presence of danger and terror. During times of trouble, we need to find God so we can be God’s people in the presence of events and people that threaten and frighten us.

That’s the situation for both Elijah and Jesus and the disciples in today’s readings. Elijah is on the run: the king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel, are after him for challenging their corrupt government-run idolatry industry; they have issued orders to kill him. He’s isolated socially as well, since everyone (or so he thinks) has joined the apostasy and abandoned God: the whole country is losing its grip, abandoning its foundation and values, forsaking its covenant with God. Elijah has been traveling through the wilderness without eating for 40 days to get to Mt. Horeb (also called Mt. Sinai), that famous mountain where God called Moses, delivered water from the rock, and gave the law. Elijah is alone, hungry and exhausted, holed up in a cave with nowhere to go: he’s in deep trouble.

It might appear that Jesus and the disciples are not in such bad shape, and indeed they’re not. But their situation is far from rosy: John the Baptist has just been beheaded and the authorities are pursuing Jesus with an aim to control and contain him, if not (yet) outright kill him. Right now, Jesus and his disciples are seldom alone; they are often surrounded by crowds of people. But they are isolated from those people in a deep sense: people come to Jesus out of need, and press him for all he can give in teaching, healing, and food itself. Their constant neediness is draining, so much so that after

feeding more than 5,000 people, Jesus sends his friends off on the water to get away from the crowds and heads up the mountain himself for some time alone with God. Threatened by the powers, isolated from community, drained by the demands of others, Jesus and the disciples are in deeper trouble than they know.

In these situations of danger and trouble, both Elijah and Peter meet God.

Elijah, in his cave, is asked, “What are you doing here?” So he gives a succinct account of his circumstances: he’s been zealous, the people have been unfaithful, he’s now completely alone, and his life is in danger. If he sounds whiny, his complaint nevertheless has merit. He’s invited out of his cave to see the Lord pass by, on the very mountain where God revealed Godself to Moses. Then there are big, noisy, calamitous events that insurance companies call “acts of God”: huge winds, an earthquake, and fire. But, contrary to the insurance companies, God is not in those calamities. After they have died down there comes a quiet so mysterious that we have trouble translating the Hebrew word for it: a “still, small voice” or “the sound of sheer silence” or “a sound. Thin. Quiet.” Elijah is in a quiet so profound with a presence so palpable that it fills his soul and everything around him. No wonder he covers his face with his cloak and goes back to his cave.

Peter is out in that boat with his friends, the other disciples of Jesus. They’re having a hard time of it, struggling with a headwind long into the night. You may know that struggle from sailing or biking or hiking yourself: you work and work, you put in all your muscle effort and skill, but still you don’t make any progress. The wind makes the waves kick up, and then it’s even harder to get to your goal, because the waves push the small boat off course and you lose even more ground. And the disciples have been at this for a long time: they took off when the meal ended (whenever that was), but they sailed well past sunset, adding to their troubles: it’s scary and dangerous to sail at night. By the time Jesus comes down the mountain towards them, it’s the early hours of the morning, and they’re exhausted, frustrated out of their minds, and scared. Jesus comes down the mountain to help them—Matthew’s casual description makes it sound as easy for him as coming downstairs—and invites Peter to come out onto the

water to him. So Peter—would you?—gets out of the boat and starts towards Jesus, but is distracted by the wind and frightened by the waves, and all of a sudden all he knows is water rushing over his face, his arms & legs flailing uselessly, and that panicked feeling of falling. The next thing he feels is Jesus' hand grasping his arm, pulling him up, and he's back in the boat, bent over, soaking wet, coughing up lake water. But the wind is calm; suddenly everything is quiet, and in that quiet Peter and the others know that they are in the presence of God.

What then? What comes from these transformational encounters with God?

Elijah, back at the mouth of his cave with his cloak wrapped tightly around him, hears the question again, "What are you doing here?" His answer is astonishing because it's exactly the same answer as the first time. For all that Elijah has encountered God, his circumstances have not changed: he's still on the run, under death threats, isolated and alone. And yet—even though he may not realize it, something has changed. He has changed. He is now ready to hear new instructions from God, to receive a new mission, and to learn that in fact, he's not alone; there are some 7,000 others still faithful to God. Not that Elijah's mission will be easy or even fulfilling: he's to anoint as king an enemy who will in fact destroy the country, and he's to anoint a new prophet to take his own place. Both the country and Elijah are heading for the end.

Neither are Peter and his buddies sailing into the sunset of a happy movie ending. They are sailing into the dawn of days that will bring more demands, greater danger, and eventually lead to betrayal and the cross. Encountering God does not guarantee a happy ending. We do not turn to God to control our outcomes: that would be using God, not trusting God. Our call is to be in God's presence even when we are afraid and isolated.

Being in the presence of God empowers us to face what's next. Elijah does not get to stay on the mountain basking in the silence, nor does Peter get to stay in the boat or even on shore with Jesus. They both will go on to those hard roads before them. They can do that because they have been in God's presence and carry that presence with them at their core. Elijah has been in the presence of God's silence. And Peter knows what it is to be rescued by Jesus. They both live, as Paul puts it, the truth that "the word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart."

So can we. If you had any doubts that we lived in troubled and frightening times that will call for courage as well as compassion, this weekend's events in Charlottesville should settle those doubts. The forces of hatred and racism are active in

this country and we must, with our brothers and sisters of the Episcopal diocese of Virginia and of other faith traditions stand against those forces and conquer them with love, following their example of staring down the barrel of a long gun while they sing. This past week we have also faced the prospect of a nuclear conflagration and must find in God the place to stand for peace. We may also be facing the winds of change in our personal lives, or the potential earthquakes of an unstable economy. God is not in those calamities. God is in the enveloping silence, and in the grasp of a hand on our arm: we have the word very near us, on our lips and in our hearts. As we face the dangers of our times, let's live in the presence of that still, small voice. Let's feel Jesus' grasp on our arms. Let's remember that our God is stronger than any of the terrors we face, and carry God's still, small voice in us on the dangerous road ahead.

Amen.