

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 9 August 2020

Scriptures: 1 Kings 19:9a,11-13a; Romans 9:1-5; Matt.14:22-33

Homily: Fr. Ken

At the conclusion of a performance of the San Francisco Symphony last Fall, a few seconds elapsed before the audience burst into applause. During the ensuing intermission, a small number of patrons remained and simply sat still, quietly relishing the exquisite performance they had just experienced.

The majority, however, quickly whipped out their cellphones and checked voicemail, email, texted messages, or talked.

It seemed that the need for constant communication won out over the momentary gift of contemplative silence.

The death of a family member, or a terminal illness, gives us pause to reflect and pray. So, also should the state of the economy and the state of our world.

So, also should the 75th anniversary today and last Thursday, of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and the Catholic city of Nagasaki, give pause to reflect and to pray: to pray for world peace and for an end to all nuclear weapons worldwide.

And, most immediately, we are drawn to reflect on the world's state of health in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we in California are fast approaching 550,000 coronavirus cases and the death of over 10,000 of our sisters and brothers in our populous nation/state.

These and so many other grim statistics not only beg immediate material assistance, of course, but they should also move each one of us to stop, pause, reflect, and pray in a contemplative silence.

The Scripture readings for this Sunday invite us precisely to do this, to choose to enter into spaces of silence, where it is easier to hear the voice of God who is constantly communicating divine love to us.

In the first reading, Elijah is discouraged and afraid for his life. He has fled from the deadly intentions of Jezebel into the desert and has plopped himself down under a broom tree and asked God to let him die. God has other plans, however, and an angel provides him with food and drink. Twice the angel has to urge him to eat and drink. He finally does so and is thus fortified for his forty-day trek to Mount Sinai. At this same mountain, God had been revealed to Moses, who likewise stood in a cleft in the rock as God's glory passed by.

At a time of deep fear and distress, Elijah goes to the place that connects him again with the roots of Israel's covenant with God.

But God is not manifest in devouring fire, like that which surrounded the mountain at the giving of the law to Moses. Nor can Elijah hear God in the fierce, crushing wind, or in the earthquake. It is in "a sound of sheer silence" that Elijah hears the voice of God.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" is the probing question that invites Elijah, and today invites each one of us, to reflect on whether our actions and choices are leading us to fulfill our heart's desires for oneness with God and God's will. The subsequent verses in the narrative sketch out how God strengthens Elijah for the remainder of his prophetic mission before he finally dies.

In the Gospel passage, we see Jesus likewise retreat to a mountain by himself to pray, following the commotion of healing and feeding a crowd of more than 5,000 people. That previous episode began with the note that Jesus had just learned of the death of John the Baptist and had withdrawn to a deserted place

by himself. But the crowds find him, and he breaks out of his solitude to respond compassionately to their needs.

The Gospel begins with Jesus' effort to retreat again. Even at night, the peoples' need for him does not abate. His disciples have been in distress in their boat on the lake ever since he left them at evening. He does not go to them immediately, however, but waits until the fourth watch of the night—the last watch, about three hours before dawn. It can be surmised that although Jesus is aware of the strong wind that is tossing them about, he remains in solitude, in the necessary inner stillness, where he experiences oneness with God and becomes strengthened to continue to minister compassionately.

Coming to the disciples at last, Jesus shares with them his gift of fearlessness. Although his beloved mentor, John the Baptist, has been executed, and although he can foresee a similar fate awaiting him as well, from the still-center of his heart-set-on-God, he can do what seems impossible. The disciples, too, when they grasp his outstretched hand to come to him, find in him the still-center where his contagious courage dispels all fear.