

19th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "A"

August 12-13, 2017

Listening to the whispers

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 9a, 11-13; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33

Being early certainly has its advantages. Once, while on retreat at a Benedictine monastery in western North Dakota, I took a morning away from the monastery to drive about an hour to Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where I proceeded to drive along a thirty-six mile loop, viewing the scenery and wildlife along the way. Because I arrived as the Park opened, I only saw one other car the entire time, pulled off the road, where they had climbed a trail to get a panoramic view. I proceeded to follow in their footsteps, and the climb was well worth it, for the view was fantastic.

However, it was not the view that impressed me as much as the sound, namely the sound of utter silence, just miles from the Montana border. The monastery was quiet, with only the hourly freight trains making their way across the plains breaking the silence. But from the Park, for as far as the eye could stretch, there were only the badlands. I could hear absolutely nothing.

Even later when I had an encounter with a buffalo, I simply pulled over, rolled down the window, as he walked right by in the other direction, dutifully keeping in his lane, as I did in mine! I could only hear the click of his hoofs on the pavement. I thought I was "cheating" on my retreat by paying the visit to the Park, but in retrospect, it was merely a continuation.

In our first reading today, we meet Elijah, who was seeking shelter in a cave. He was told to stand on the mountain of the Lord, waiting for the Lord to pass by. King Ahab's reign was marred by spiritual compromise and failure. He had taken a foreigner, Jezebel, as his queen and she was despised by those who were faithful to Yahweh. Jezebel had replaced the priests of God with priests of her foreign gods. Only the prophet **Elijah** stood up to Jezebel.

In the book of Kings, we are told that **Elijah** challenged Jezebel's prophets to determine who was the true God. The false prophets called on their gods and **Elijah** called on Yahweh to see which would rain fire from heaven and consume their offerings. After the false prophets failed, **Elijah** repeatedly poured water over the offering and wood on his altar. In response to his prayer, God rained down fire to consume his offering and even the stone altar. When all the people saw what had happened, they fell on their knees and cried: "*The LORD indeed is God.*" Elijah fled for the caves, fearing for his life.

Our first reading explains that the young Elijah hid his face in his cloak, not possibly able to comprehend what the Lord would ask of him. Perhaps he felt very alone, alone with the Lord, wondering what that would mean for him. He had to embrace the silence. In our silence, we hear the whisper of God, our conscience discerns the voice of God. The Second Vatican Council teaches: "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."¹

Yet Elijah obeyed the Lord, becoming one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. God was with him on the mountain top when he challenged the false prophets. He was with him in his journey through the wilderness and was with him in the cave during the earthquake, wind and fire.

But it was only in the tiny whisper that **Elijah** finally heard Him. God spoke to him in the depths of his soul and his conscience, that judgement of practical reason that helps us to recognize and seek what is good, and reject what is evil.² He went back; he followed the directive of the Lord, he no longer ran away from his duty.

¹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778, 1796

Our fears about our work, family life, marriage, about the state of our society and its divisions and lives of your children- all these can consume us, drowning out the voice of God. We may legitimately want to run away. We are left with a constant flow of competing sounds echoing in our hearts and minds, making it nearly impossible to feel God's presence. This can be a serious problem in our spiritual lives. But we have options...we can learn from Elijah.

Consider trying to force yourselves, if necessary, to be silent, absent of radio, TV, music. Arrive in Church ten minutes before Mass, and sit in silence. Take a few minutes at your desk at work, saying a Morning Offering Prayer before checking e-mails and voice mails. Take your morning coffee in a quiet place, if such a one exists at home, and be still before the Lord. It works wonders! Sign up for an hour of Adoration in the Cana Chapel, even once per month if possible. There are many options.

But in all this, the words of Scripture also serve to comfort us. The hand of the Lord is there, reaching out to grasp us, lest we sink in the water. Just as Peter, we doubt, but this doubt must not become persistent. Christ can shoulder our fears; cast them off into the waters of His love and grace. Let His love envelope you.

God longs for this peace in each of us. Let us seek this peace by casting aside our fears, entrusting our entire lives to the Good Lord.