

Sermon: Pentecost IX: Proper 14

Mark VandeBrake

August 10, 2014

Year A

1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalm 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

The Bible can be thought of as a record of encounters between God and humans, of course it's more than that, but this is what I want to focus on in our scripture readings for today. Now encounters with God can be uncomfortable, revelatory, life changing, healing, or a variety of other things, depending on our spiritual condition. In our readings, Elijah and Peter have very different encounters, and Paul tells us we can be the means of spreading the good news so someone else can have a saving encounter with God.

Now, our reading from 1 Kings, only gives us the end of the story of how Elijah ends up hiding in a cave on Mt. Horeb, and why God is asking him, "Why are you here Elijah?" The truth was that he was AWOL from his job as God's prophet in Israel, and that without consulting God, he had run for his life, after Queen Jezebel had sworn an oath to have him killed, for killing the 450 prophets of Baal after the contest on Mt. Carmel. He had even left his servant at Israel's border and gone on alone "40" days, or a very long time, into the desert without adequate provisions, and before reaching his destination was famished, dehydrated, exhausted, and very depressed, and he asked God to just let him die. Instead, God sent an angel to give him food and water, which gave him strength to get to Mt. Horeb.

Elijah's response to God's question why he was there, which was a frenzied reply that was probably exaggerated to justify the sheer panic and fright that took hold of Elijah, wasn't convincing to God, and my sense is that, with the passing by of mighty winds, earthquake and fire, which God was not in, but instead in sheer silence, God was trying to bring Elijah out of his state of shock or denial that he seemed to be stuck in. When God repeated the question and Elijah gave the same reply, God moved on to Plan B,

sending Elijah back to Israel, but having him anoint other people who would finish the work of removing King Ahab and Jezebel from the throne of Israel. God can only work with prophets who don't run for their lives and then distort the truth. This encounter with God must have been painful to Elijah, but he didn't lose his standing with God, for he was taken up to heaven in a chariot some time later, and eventually appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Peter's encounter with the divine went somewhat better. After feeding the five thousand, sending the disciples across the lake in a boat, dismissing the crowd, and going up the mountain to pray, Jesus walked out around daybreak to the disciple's boat on a stormy sea. In the early morning mist, the disciples thought they saw a ghost on the water, and they were fearful, but Jesus reassured them it was he and told them not to be afraid. Now Elijah had gotten off the track when he became afraid, he followed his flight instinct and ran, rather than asking God for help, but Peter responded to Jesus' words and asked to be commanded to walk out to him. Jesus did so and Peter stepped out in faith, doing well until he let fear creep back in and started to sink, but had the presence of mind to cry for help, something Elijah didn't do. Jesus reached out and pulled Peter up and into the boat and the winds died down. Jesus rebuked him for doubting, but the disciples had their faith strengthened, witnessing the encounter.

Paul says in Romans 10, that we don't have to ascend up to heaven to bring Christ down, or descend to the abyss to bring Christ up from the dead, for the Word is in our hearts and on our lips. We don't have to be envious of the disciples for their access to Jesus while he was on earth, because the same Spirit is in us and among us. If we can get past the limitations of taking the Bible literally, we can have encounters with Christ such as Peter had walking on water, by faith through the Spirit. For example, this story has been very meaningful to me because of a creative encounter I had with it about 35 years ago. In November of 1979, I was laid off from my job, married, with a six month old infant, and living in an upstairs apartment. We had very modest savings, and initially I felt fear, but felt somehow God would provide. Being laid off, aside from

looking for work, I had more time for my neglected art, and started work on a series of block prints from the Bible. Now I can't remember exactly how it happened anymore, but this story really resonated with me, I was metaphorically in stormy waters financially, and during this time I did two prints with this stormy water image, one of Jesus stilling the storm, and a two color one of Peter walking on the water. I had a sense, that like Peter I could step out of the boat and walk on the stormy waters to Jesus, but in this case, with no literal water, I made the prints as an act of faith instead, and I could look at them and remind myself and God that he would keep us afloat financially and still the storm.

Unemployment insurance was for 6 months back then, and with time running out, I got a call from a friend in our sharing group who said a sign shop owner in his parish needed a screen printer. I took the job which lasted for five years, was laid off, but again as unemployment insurance was running out, got another phone call, informing me of a job in a sign shop which I took, and in the 29 years since then God has always stilled the storm when things got rough, so to speak.

Now this was a different kind of encounter than that of Elijah and Peter, not as dramatic or impressive, but nevertheless real. However, we don't need to be in life threatening circumstances in order to have an encounter with God. Since the Spirit is in our hearts and on our lips, we don't have to go searching for God on Mt. Horeb, or any other place, we only need to turn off the noise in our heads and slow down our busy lives, and pay attention to what we are doing. We can encounter God if we are willing to keep our minds in the present moment, rather than on our hurts from the past or fear for the future.

There was a Catholic priest in France who was spiritual adviser to nuns in the 18th century who wrote a little book called *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, named Jean-Pierre de Caussade. He writes, "God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment...we find all that is necessary in the present moment...We

are bored with the small happenings around us, yet it is these trivialities- as we consider them- which would do marvels for us if only we did not despise them.”

Now I have pondered this book off and on for many years, sometimes understanding it and sometimes struggling with it. I found the book to be true, but sometimes I resisted it, because I didn't want to give up my agenda and accept God's. I have spent my working years doing physical labor, often fairly menial and repetitious, with a lot of potential for boredom, and only have a couple hours a day for my artwork, and I kept telling God it should be the other way around. The time I spent on my art was rewarding and fulfilling, but that was only a couple hours a day, what about the majority of the time I spent doing more humble tasks? Eventually, I started catching on, that when I stayed with my attention in the present, did my work as best I could, and put my heart into it, I felt alive and productive, even if I was only cleaning a bathroom. My acceptance and welcoming, rather than resisting or merely tolerating the work God gave me to do, allowed me to see that God wills and values our serving others, no matter how lowly it may seem to us. When we accept our tasks and creatively serve others, what is happening is that we are living the Good News, and others may encounter God through our actions.

In fact, I discovered that the joy and wonder I was searching for came at those times I was co-creating with God, both doing art and cleaning floors and window. Living creatively, rather than from habit, or from our emotions, keeps us in God's presence.

My prints of Jesus stilling the stormy waters and the de Caussade book, became icons for me to encounter God at my point of need, and God did use them to help me in a way that strengthened my faith. As life goes on we are continually presented with new problems just as we overcome our old ones, it often seems. However, when we have given up our own agendas and welcome what God sends to us, we can be confident we won't wake up one day as Elijah did, and hear God ask us, "Why are you here?", but will instead hear that we have the beautiful feet of those who bring good news. Amen.