

Peter M. Antoci
A-14, track 2
I Kings 19:9-18
Matt 14:22-33

Encounter with Providence

Today we have two famous biblical episodes: Elijah's flight to Mount Horeb, and his encounter with God there, and Jesus walking on the water while Peter sinks beneath the waves in the Sea of Galilee. They are stories with a lot of drama. Elijah has learned that Queen Jezebel has put a bounty on his head, and he ends his prophetic ministry in a despairing flight into the wilderness. The disciples have witnessed the power Jesus has with and over the crowds in Galilee, but goes off with them to a disturbing and spooky event. But at the heart of it, these are stories about faith: where we put it, and what happens when we are distressed. God's providence is right there in the unfolding drama of their lives, but Elijah and Peter lose sight of it because they are caught up in the events themselves. Who would blame them for not seeing the big picture when fleeing for your life, or swimming for it!

How very much like our own lives. It is easy for us to be driven to despair, or overwhelmed by the undertow of worry. Of course it makes perfect sense that events can overtake us, or anxieties overwhelm us. Real life is like that. Who are we to blame Elijah for not seeing the big picture, when his life's work comes crashing down; when the government's officers are hunting him down to kill him? Even God now concedes that Elijah's work is done, because Elijah is completely unphased by his encounter with God on the mountain. He leaves there with the same words on his lips as when he arrived there. And so God asks him to ordain a new prophet. Who are we to blame the disciples' fright when their eyes tell them a ghost is walking towards them on a

stormy sea? Can we blame Peter for panicking when he feels the waves reach above his neck? We certainly know something ourselves about treachery, fearful specters, and dangerous waters. Most of us would have trouble seeing the hand of God, or grace in these circumstances.

These scriptures teach us that life is much more than what we can see in front of us, no matter how fearful or dangerous it may seem in the moment. We can fail to grasp that God is present in every circumstance, no matter how disappointed, or how distracted we may be. Jesus is constantly inviting us into a closer walk, a deeper faith, an un-sinking vision, no matter what storm we are facing.

We do struggle to put it all together, and sometimes it doesn't work. It doesn't make sense because our senses and our reasoning often leave out the element of grace. We take for granted that everything that happens to us is solely the result of our own or other people's choices, and when it doesn't add up, we suffer even more. What would happen if we started listening to another kind of logic, a different type of reasoning, a broader sense perception? That is what God was trying to do for Elijah in his despair, and what Jesus was trying to teach Peter in his panic.

This logic is based upon a wider frame of reference than we normally assume. This kind of reasoning is derived from a set of assumptions deeper than those we normally allow. It is a sense perception attuned to stimuli we usually overlook. Jesus invites us to come to him even while the water is rough; you might say, ESPECIALLY when it is rough! People may not understand this; it may even appear a bit daft or even insane. But then again the peace of God's Spirit CAN appear insane. There is a wonderful, anonymous quote that goes

something like this: *I do not suffer from insanity; I rather enjoy it!* From the world's point of view, that could indeed be the description of a true Christian.

Now anytime water is mentioned in the New Testament, it is a symbol for baptism, and early Christians DID read these *water* stories AT baptismal liturgies. But here, in this story, the water is dangerous, and walking on it is not something logic, reason or our senses usually recommend! The storm is up, the disciples are in a panic, and Jesus is the only source of steady calm. So Peter takes a chance. He chooses a different sort of logic, and clearly we are meant to admire Peter for doing so. But as you know, Peter is not the hero of this story, because he cannot SUSTAIN his new sensibility; it is too fresh, too new, too tender. This was a baptismal story early Christians told, to remind themselves that the waters of baptism are fraught with danger; that the life of faith is never sustainable by oneself; and that following Jesus requires reaching for his hand every day, lest we lose ourselves.

This is not just a tale about one disciple. It is a story about Matthew's church community, and it has become a lesson for the whole Christian community. At the kernel of our experience of life, love, and faith lies the EARLIEST Christian prayer, right in the middle of this episcope: LORD, SAVE ME! Save me here and now, not yesterday and not tomorrow, but save me where I am today. No matter WHAT is happening, you do not need any other prayer than those, three, short, words.