

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 9, 2020

Introduction

As I was thinking about the Scripture Lesson and the Gospel for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, I was struck by sense of isolation that is often part of our lives. In the Scripture Lesson, the prophet Elijah has defeated King Ahab and Queen Jezebel's prophets of Baal in a contest to determine who will be the God of Israel. Despite this victory, Elijah becomes a hunted man as the king and queen seek to kill him. Elijah flees to the wilderness seeking safety and the protection of God. He was utterly alone; seemingly abandoned by the God on whose behalf he spoke. In the Gospel, Jesus sends the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he remains alone to pray. However, the disciples are beset by a storm and fear for their lives. Both Elijah and the disciples must have cried out to God and asked for help: ***'God, where are you when we need you?'***

We can echo this question as we continue to deal with the pandemic and the havoc it has raised in our lives. I miss my family and my friends. I miss the intimacies that I presumed would always be possible. I miss worship in the sanctuary on Sundays. I miss socializing and just going to the store . . . The list is endless. And what about those who are suffering with the economic fallout from the pandemic? What about those who have lost loved ones to the disease? What about the fear that is immobilized us as we mask and social distance from one another? ***God, where are you when we need you?***

The good news today is that we are not alone even though it seems that we are. Yes, it is true that Jesus was not with his disciples; they were alone in the boat. Jesus stayed on the shore to pray. But even though Jesus was not with them, his disciples were never far from his thoughts. St. Matthew tells us that he *'went up the mountain to pray.'* While the disciples were at sea, he was still with them in prayer. He was aware of the waves . . . He was aware of the wind . . . And he was aware of their fear; just as he is aware of our fear. Remember: Jesus is the Immanuel [God with us]. No matter what we perceive, we are not alone . . . Just as Elijah and the Twelve found when they were beset by troubles that threatened to consume them. God was present in the midst of their perils and troubles.

Pastoral Note

Our next outdoor worship services will be on August 16 with parking lot worship at Bethel Lutheran [8:30 am] and at Immanuel [10:30]. Note that we will be using an abridged liturgy with no oral responses by the congregation. Your congregational

presidents have been very thorough in their planning and they will keep you informed about schedules. We plan to have bulletins for each service.

When will we return to the sanctuary? That is an open question. I need to be convinced by the infection data that it is safe to do so. I am hoping that we will have a clearer picture by the end of September. We must be patient and practice the protocols that will guarantee our safety. So be careful. Continue to mask and socially distance. May God bless you.

***In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve***

Scripture Lesson – 1 Kings 19.9-18

⁹At that place Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

¹¹He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Gospel – Matthew 14.22-33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

“To Be Alone – God, where are you when we need you?”

Let us pray. – Lord Jesus, we come to you trusting your promise that you will always be with us, even when we feel as if we are alone. We ask that you would be with us as we seek respite from the pandemic that is moving through our communities. In our desperate loneliness, we are battered and bruised as the storms of life threaten our faith and our sense of wellbeing.

But Lord, you come to us in the midst of the storm and calm the waters . . . You remind us that even though we are separated from you, you are never separated from us. Let your Holy Spirit banish our fear and strengthen our faith so that we trust that you will be with us always . . . Even to the end of the world. We pray in your name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Popular history can be misleading, but sometimes it does not tell you the whole story. I always assumed that when the Pilgrims landed Plymouth Rock, it was the first English settlement in the New World. But more careful study told a different story. Some thirty-five years before the Pilgrims, the English founded a colony on Roanoke Island in Virginia. In 1585, Sir Walter Raleigh was empowered by Queen Elizabeth I of England to develop cities, to farm the land, and to trade with the native peoples in the name of the Crown.

But life did not go well for the colonists. There was constant skirmishing with the native Americans and the crops yielded little food. The colony was in such desperate strait that the leadership decided to send the ship back to Britain under the command of Sir Richard Grenville to purchase more supplies. But Grenville was delayed in England. When he did return six years later, he found the buildings of the Roanoke colony gutted by fire; but there was no sign of the people — The ninety men, seventeen women, and nine children had simply vanished. A closer search revealed that the colonists' personal belongings were also gone, almost as if they had packed up and left. Grenville found only a wooden post with the word 'Roatan' carved into it. The colonists had disappeared.

I've often wondered what it was like during those last months at Roanoke. One can only speculate that desperation was rising among the people. ***Perhaps*** there was an epidemic, . . . ***Perhaps*** the crops failed . . . ***Perhaps*** they were carried away by the native Americans after a fierce battle . . . ***Or perhaps***, they burnt their own settlement and went looking for someplace better to live. Whatever the case, the colonists must have been very alone at the end. They must have longed to see an English ship on the horizon. With each passing month, their hope of ever seeing family and friends again diminished. The idea of death in a foreign land, seemingly impossible when they left England, was now very real. As the months turned into years, they could not help but think that they had been abandoned.

The ill-fated colonists of Roanoke Island are not unique in history . . . Others have also felt abandoned by those who should have been concerned for them. As I listen to the stories of men and women who served in the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War, there is a heaviness in their words. Many are still embittered because of the war protests at home while they were putting their lives at risk in the field. Their sense of abandonment is very real. The American public understood neither the ugliness of war Vietnamese jungles nor the suffering of its soldiers. And now, veterans from the wars in the Gulf are beginning to experience the same thing . . . A sense of isolation and estrangement as they return to their families, their communities, and their places of employment. To a lesser degree, I think that many people are experiencing the same sort of loneliness and sense of abandonment today. This time it isn't a war; but rather, it is the pandemic that we face together . . . A pandemic that seems to be relentless as it burns across our nation and the world.

I think that today's Gospel speaks about our sense of isolation. Matthew tells us about a storm on the Sea of Galilee; a storm that put the lives of Jesus' disciples at risk.

As the story begins, the disciples were with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It had been a long and tiring day. Since early in the morning, the people had been coming . . . They wanted to hear Jesus, they wanted to touch him and they wanted him to heal their sick. Then Jesus had miraculously fed all five thousand with bread and fish. But now it was dusk and the crowds were gone. Both Jesus and the disciples were weary. So he sent his disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a small boat. They were to await him on the other side while he stayed behind to pray.

As the disciples sailed across the Sea, a heavy wind came up and slowed their progress. In the darkness, the winds and the waves broke over their tiny boat. They struggled to stay afloat. They were tired, they were frightened, and they were at the limit of their endurance. Suddenly, they saw what appeared to be a ghost walking upon the water and they were terrified. As the apparition came near to them, it spoke, 'TAKE HEART, IT IS I; DO NOT BE AFRAID.' It was the voice of Jesus.

Matthew continues the story: Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹He said, 'COME.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'YOU OF LITTLE FAITH, WHY DID YOU DOUBT?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

I like this story because it raises some very real issues for those who follow Jesus. At first reading, it's simply a miracle story; but in the Gospels, miracle stories are more complex than the suspension of the natural order. In the ancient world, many miracle stories were part of everyday conversation. But the Church remembers miracle stories because they explore the intersection of the Kingdom of God with our world. Miracle stories in the Gospels always address a human need, but they also tell us something unique about Jesus and the nature of discipleship.

When Matthew wrote his Gospel, the followers of Jesus were beginning to face persecution. It was becoming difficult to continue to follow Jesus. I think that the early church remembered this story because it spoke to their fears . . . Especially their fear that they had been abandoned by Jesus after his return to the Father.

A sense of abandonment is not unusual. Psychologists tell us that at one time of another, we all feel as if we are alone. So alone, in fact, that we yearn for the time when we were children and had someone else to protect us. We worry about the future, about work, and about our loved ones. Living with the uncertainty of ‘*What if?*’ is both difficult and isolating.

I learned this in my first parish in Southwestern Minnesota. I had just finished doing a funeral home service in Morris, Minnesota and had stopped for lunch at a small diner. Seeing that I was clergy, a man stopped and asked if we could talk for a moment. Things had been going horribly in his life, and he was wondering where God was in all this. In a quiet voice, he asked: **Can a person lose God?** Then he thought for a minute and changed the words: **‘No pastor, my real question is: Can God lose a me?’**

Frightening questions . . . Abandoned by God . . . And I don’t think this young man was unique . . . It’s not difficult to lose sight of God. That’s really what happened to Elijah in today’s First Lesson . . . He had lost sight of God . . . He believed that he was alone. We can understand this . . . **Sometimes** it’s hard to be a person of faith . . . **Sometimes** everything seems hopeless . . . **Sometimes**, it truly seems as if God has abandoned us to our own devices. We’ve all been there . . . You know what I’m talking about: *Worrying about the health and wellbeing loved ones . . . Worrying about our jobs in a changing economy . . . Pouring over a check book wondering how to make ends meet . . . A sense of frustration . . . A sense of fear . . . A sense of abandonment.* The isolation that is now an all too real part of our lives as we separate ourselves from family, friends, and our old way of life. In the nearly the six months we have been masking, social distancing, and quarantining ourselves, it seems as if we are so alone and on our own. I think it is perfectly natural to ask, ‘God, where are you when we need you?’

Even the Church is not immune. I’ve heard people talking about how hard it is for us to be the people of God this unbelieving world of ours. So much has changed for those who would be Christian . . . And we talk about how hard it is ‘do ministry’ here in our communities. We ask over and over again, ‘Why don’t more people come to church? What are we going to do now?’ We see ourselves as such a small part of Christ’s Church . . . A small part with meager resources. And sometimes, we think that we have all we can do to just hang on. **We ask, ‘God, where are you when we need you?’** I think that this is the story of all disciples who face storms on the sea of life. Like the twelve, we fear for our lives as the sea of adversity breaks over us. We are frightened because Jesus is not with us. At such times of crisis, we feel as if we are totally alone.

But there is a word of grace and comfort in this little story. Yes, it is true that Jesus was not with his disciples. They were alone in the boat because Jesus stayed on the shore to pray. Although he was not with them, they were never far from his thoughts. Matthew tells us that Jesus ‘went up the mountain to pray.’ While the disciples were at sea, he was still with them in prayer. **He was aware** of the waves . . . **He was aware** of the wind . . . **And he was aware** of their fear. In a like manner, our Lord Jesus is with us in times of trial. **Jesus knows** our grief, our isolation, and our fear because is one of us.

The good news today is that Jesus does much more than just remember us. He has promised to be with us as the trials of life break over us. Jesus comes to us just as he did to the disciples on that troubled sea. He comes to each of us in the waters of our Baptism. Under the sign of water, he claims us forever as his own. He continues to come to us in his Holy Word and as we gather for worship . . . And he comes to us under the signs of bread and wine as we eat his holy meal. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds those who struggle with their faith that ‘ . . . **neither death nor life . . . nor things present, nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all of creation can be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**’

The Gospel story becomes all the more real when we see what happens to Peter. When he sees Jesus coming toward them on the water, Peter asks if he too can walk on the waves. At the command of Jesus, Peter stepped over the side and walked on the water. He did so until he saw the wind and the waves all around him. Then he began to sink.

I think that our walk of faith is a lot like Peter’s when Jesus calls us to take the first tentative steps of faith. Like Peter, we step out over the side of the boat in faith that Jesus will care for us. As long as we focus our attention only on Jesus, we are safe and secure. But if like Peter, we let our eyes be diverted by the wind and waves, we will sink into the sea. When we focus on Jesus, the winds, the waves, and the trials of life take on their proper perspective. Without Jesus, they are life-threatening . . . With Jesus, we can survive.

I think that it is really a question of faith. Is the one who calls us in Baptism able to care for us? Will Jesus truly be with us in all that we do? Is the ministry to which we have been called here at Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran Churches too great for us? Are we powerless? Is the situation hopeless?

The good news today is that the disciples were not left alone in the boat . . . Peter was not left to sink beneath the waves. The Lord Jesus reached his hand and lifted Peter up . . . And it is the same Lord Jesus who reaches out to us this day. He reaches out to Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran and offers his hand . . . And with his help, this church will survive . . . Its ministry will prosper . . . And it will remain a faithful witness to the life-giving Gospel of Jesus. Today, this same Lord Jesus reaches his hand to you and to me because he knows the frailty of our faith and how frightened we are. Nonetheless, his strong hand seeks us amidst the waves. And with the touch of his loving hand, we know that we are safe. Amen.