

19th Sunday In Ordinary Time Cycle A (August 13th, 2017)

1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a

In this passage the prophet Elijah has defeated the prophets of Baal in a spectacular display of God's power. The problem is that Jezebel, the queen, was a devotee of the god, Baal, so she was not pleased. Elijah fled for his life and went to the mountain of God, Horeb, also known as Sinai. This mountain was the traditional place to meet God and the wind, earthquake and fire are the traditional symbols of God's presence. Contrary to Elijah's expectations, however, the Lord does not reveal the divine presence in any of these spectacular manifestations of power, but in a "tiny whispering sound."² The realization of the presence of God in our lives usually occurs after the wind dies down. In the midst of stormy times, our fear and confusion can deafen us to the subtle and quiet ways in which God is revealed.³ This story has close parallels with the story of Moses on the same mountain. Both journey to the mountain to meet God; Moses while fleeing from the Egyptians and Elijah while fleeing from Jezebel. Both even receive miraculous rations in route (manna and bread). In today's reading we hear of Elijah's encounter with God.¹¹

9at the mountain of God, Horeb, Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter. It was Elijah's mission to reestablish the covenant and restore the pure faith so it is fitting that he returned to the mountain where the covenant was revealed to Moses and through him to the Israelite people.¹²

11Then the Lord said to him, "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by." A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake. The divine manifestations that Moses experienced were thunder, lightning, heavy cloud, loud trumpet blasts, fire, Mt. Sinai wrapped in smoke and earthquakes (the mountain trembled). (Ex 19:18f) These manifestations, like the ones mentioned here, herald the divine presence but they do not constitute the presence itself.¹²

12After the earthquake there was fire—but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. St. Irenaeus wrote that it was in this way that the prophet, who was greatly downcast by the transgression of the people and the murder of the prophets, learned to work with greater calm.¹

13When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak. The reason Elijah hid his face was because he was afraid that he would see God and die for God told Moses that, "No man sees me and still lives." (Ex 33:20) **and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.** It was in the time of Christ on the mountain of the Transfiguration that Moses and Elijah finally beheld the unveiled face of God.¹

Romans 9:1-5

In this reading Paul wrestles with a difficult question: How is it that the chosen people have rejected the Messiah God sent and where does that leave them? This situation caused Paul great personal anguish. He considers the Jews his people, his brothers and sisters, and God's chosen ones. He is so anguished that he says he would even allow himself to be separated from Christ if that would mean his brothers and sisters would be saved. That's a strong statement reminiscent of Moses' prayer that God strike him from the book of life if the Israelites were not forgiven for making the golden calf.²

Brothers and sisters:

1I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; This adamant plea of innocence suggests that Paul was accused of indifference toward Israel. He uses the same expression to clear away suspicions and rumors in some of his other writings.⁴ **my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness**
2that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. Living for Christ often seems harder than dying for Christ because it means that we must die to ourselves every day.¹³

³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. Here we have typical oriental exaggeration. Paul is not referring to permanent separation from God, that is, eternal damnation, but to being ready to renounce any material or spiritual favor God might grant him. He is making it plain that he would put the salvation of the chosen people ahead of his own personal advantage.⁶

⁴They are Israelites; Instead of the common political title of “Jews,” Paul reverently makes use of their honored religious title bestowed of old by Yahweh himself on his people. He proceeds to recount seven historic privileges connected with this name.⁵ **theirs the adoption,** This refers to the adoption of Israel as the “son of God”, making it Yahweh’s covenant partner and chosen people.⁵ **the glory,** The second privilege was the resplendent manifestation of Yahweh’s presence in the desert Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple.⁵ **the covenants,** A covenant is more than a contract, it is a sacred family bond. With Adam, God established the covenant of marriage. The agreement was developed and renewed over time but the main spokesmen were Noah for his household, Abraham who represented the tribe, Moses the nation, and David the kingdom. Jesus bore all the curses of the previously broken covenants and ratified the New Covenant.¹⁴ **the giving of the law,** This was the expression of God’s will given to Moses.⁵ **the worship,** The refined worship of Yahweh in the Temple, so different from the idolatry of Israel’s neighbors which often included prostitution and human sacrifice, was Israel’s fifth privilege.⁵ **and the promises;** The sixth privilege consisted of the gratuitous promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Moses and David.⁵ This refers especially to the promises of a coming Messiah.⁶

⁵**theirs the patriarchs,** This is a reference to Israel’s ancestral heritage for the people still worshiped the God of their fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).⁵ This inventory of Israel’s seven covenant blessings are tokens of God’s irrevocable commitment to the people of Israel that gave them an “advantage” over other nations, drawing them closer to God, ordering their worship, and showing them the way of righteousness.⁴ **and from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ,** The most remarkable honor bestowed on the chosen people is to be seen clearly in the fact that God himself chose to assume a human nature which had all the characteristics of the Israelite race.⁶ **who is over all,** Their crowning gift is the Messiah, who came many centuries after the initial endowments had been given through Moses and the patriarchs.⁴ Unfortunately, he was not recognized as such.⁵ **God blessed forever. Amen.** By calling Jesus Christ “God, blessed for ever” his divinity is being declared in a most explicit manner.⁶ Paul’s lament is poignant and touching. All that benefits Christians belongs to the Jews: adoption, glory, covenant, law, worship, promise, patriarchs and Jesus himself in his human origins. We should allow ourselves to be moved deeply by Paul’s sorrow, and to acknowledge anew our indebtedness to our Jewish brothers and sisters. The modern reader cannot help but be reminded of Pope John’s XXIII’s insight: “Spiritually, we are all Semites.”³

Matthew 14:22-33

Today’s reading about Jesus walking on the water follows immediately after the account of the feeding of the multitude that we heard last Sunday. The stormy seas provide a setting in which Jesus is able to show his power over the forces of nature, to test the faith of the leader of the apostles, and to indicate the degree of faith necessary if his disciples are to weather the storms that are an inevitable part of Christian life.³

²²After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side,²³while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Jesus’ private prayer, in an interlude between one demanding activity and another, teaches us that every Christian needs to take time out for recollection, to speak to his Father, God.⁸ Praying was the core of

Jesus' activity. He prayed in all circumstances.¹³ The letter to the Philippians tells us to pray about everything, worry about nothing and the peace that surpasses all understanding will be ours. (Phil 4:6,7)

24When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. In this scene the headwinds could represent the hostile forces of the world which will buck them every step of the way.¹¹

25During the fourth watch of the night, The 12 hours of the night between 6PM and 6AM were divided into four "watches." This event took place between 3 and 6 AM and suggests the disciples were battling the storm most of the night.⁷ he came toward them walking on the sea. To walk over something is symbolic of dominating it.¹⁰

26When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. It is a law of the spiritual life that in order to come to the point where we can finally abandon ourselves totally TO God, we must first feel what appears to be utter abandonment BY God.¹⁰

27At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; This is literally "I Am." In light of his power over nature, Jesus' statement may allude to God's self-revelation at the burning bush. Jesus thus goes beyond reassuring the disciples and claims for himself a divine identity and authority.⁷ do not be afraid." Our translation makes this sound like a general prohibition against fearing, but it is actually an ORDER that means to put a stop to fear immediately: 'I forbid you to go on fearing for one more second' is the full implication.¹⁰

28Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter serves as spokesman for the Twelve by responding to the statement of Jesus.⁹

29He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.

30But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" The OT background for this cry is found in Psalm 69 where it is the cry of those in danger of drowning.⁹ St. John Chrysostom comments that in this episode Jesus taught Peter to realize that all his strength came from the Lord and that he could not rely on his own resources, on his own weakness and wretchedness. Chrysostom goes as far as to say that "if we fail to play our part, God ceases to help us".⁸

31Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" How often we are like Peter: brave in the boat but timid in the water!

32After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Peter has authority over his brethren because he has suffered, faltered, implored, and been saved, and because it is precisely out of this experience that he brings back the Lord Jesus for all the rest.¹⁰

33Those who were in the boat did him homage, The word that is used here refers to the liturgical prostration before the awesomeness of God with the forehead to the floor.¹⁰ saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God." The OT credits God alone with authority over the sea. Aware of this, the disciples now worshipped him as the "Son of God."⁷

This episode has applications to Christian life. The Church, like the Apostles' boat, also gets into difficulties, and Jesus who watches over this Church comes to its rescue also, after allowing it to wrestle with obstacles and be strengthened in the process. He give us encouragement: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." We show our faith and fidelity by striving to keep an even keel and by calling on his aid when we feel ourselves weakening: "Lord, save me". Then our Lord does save us, and we urgently confess our faith: "Truly you are the Son of God."⁸

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "The Navarre Bible: Joshua-Kings," (2) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (3) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers" by Aelred Rosser, (4)

“Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (5) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (6) “The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians,” (7) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (8) “The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew,” (9) “The Gospel of Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (10) “Fire Of Mercy, Heart Of The Word” by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (11) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (12) “St. Joseph Edition The New American Bible,” (13) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study Cycle A” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, and (14) “A Father Who Keeps His Promises” by Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.