

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 8.13.17

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13/Romans 9:1-5/

Matthew 14:22-33

### GOD'S LOVE THUNDERS IN THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Years ago there was a popular radio host and broadcaster by the name of Paul Harvey. After he told one of his intriguing news stories with some hidden or unknown details, he would end by saying *...And now you know the rest of the story*. Today I wanted to share with you *the rest of the story* about the prophet Elijah. Elijah occupies center stage in our reading from the Old Testament today -- the Book of Kings. We find him in a cave looking for God to come to his rescue.



It would serve us well to recall more about his life as a prophet than this short passage reveals. So much intrigue surrounded Elijah's life that the little bit of the story we hear today doesn't do him justice. Elijah had an attitude problem. He was a great

prophet and he knew it, and he was no slouch when it came to exotic displays and show-stopping events.

Let's situate the prophet's story. When Elijah first began his tour of duty as a prophet, he met with great success and much support. He had the world on a string. When he wandered hungry and alone in the desert, God commanded ravens to supply him with food. So each morning the ravens brought him bread and in the evening meat. And in the parched desert, dry from years of drought, he quenched his thirst at an unknown stream to which God led him. You'll recall the story about the reluctant widow who had only enough food for one more day for herself and her son. Elijah demanded that she bake a couple bagels for him. She baked them for Elijah and, as a blessing in return, he promised her a jar of meal that would never be empty and a jug of oil that would never run dry. Even the super big box of Captain Crunch from Costco has to be replenished sooner or later, but the widow's miraculous supply of flour and oil, Elijah's miracle gift, never ran out.

Well, enough of small-time side shows -- a kindness here or there for a poor widow and birds providing his meager brunch. Now the prophet was ready to take his show on the road, but as in every good story, the hero has to have his antagonist. And Elijah's nemesis was the evil queen Jezebel -- Jezebel, who didn't serve the one true God, but took up with the false god Baal. She had a penchant for nastiness and horror. Jezebel had taken to butchering the prophets of God. She thought she was pretty hot stuff, but she hadn't come up against the likes of Elijah. Now she would get a run for her money.

A showdown is scheduled for high noon on Mount Carmel. Ahab, the king of Israel -- who married the pagan Jezebel and followed after her false gods, leading the people astray -- called all of Israel and his prophets together. This was the event which would prove whose team was better: Elijah and those who followed Yahweh -- or Jezebel, and the followers of Baal. Let the games begin.

Elijah demanded that two bulls be brought in. Each team would sacrifice a bull to their god, a burnt offering. But they wouldn't light the fire. Instead the prophets would call down the power of their god who would strike a fire that would consume the offering. Elijah set the goal: "The god who answers with fire is God indeed." And everyone agreed to the rules of the game. Baal's team went first because there were more of them. They selected the bull, slaughtered it and placed it upon the altar. From morning till noontime they danced around the altar, call upon Baal. Nothing happened. Around noon, Elijah started jeering at them. *"Maybe your God is asleep, call louder."* More shouts and pleading. Still no fire to burn the offering on the altar. Taunting them further, Elijah said: *"Perhaps he went on a journey and just got back. Try again."* Nothing. Now it was Yahweh's turn. Elijah called the Israelites closer.

He set up an altar of twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. He arranged wood on the altar, dismembered the bull and placed it on the altar. Then, with dramatic flare, Elijah ordered four jars filled with water to be poured on the altar and the wood and the holocaust. The Israelites obeyed and doused the altar. He told them to do it a second time, so once more they drenched the bull and the wood. And then, for good measure, he ordered them to soak it a third time. [We all know wet wood

won't burn!] Now Elijah was ready to show the right stuff. They'd soon learn who is king of the mountain.

*"Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,"* Elijah prayed, *"let them know today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant. Answer me so that this people may know you, Yahweh, are God and are winning back their hearts."* With a snap of the prophet's finger the fire of Yahweh God fell and consumed the bull and the wood, lapping up all the water in the trench around the altar. Elijah gloated with pride. The gold medal went around his neck and he ordered the false prophets of Baal to be taken away and slaughtered.



It made for a great show, but -- as you might well imagine -- Jezebel was none too happy when she received word about Elijah making her and Baal look like fools, and slaughtering all her prophets in the process. Elijah is now running scared and high tails it out of town. This time, instead of ravens, God sends an angel to feed the prophet for his long escape: a forty-day and forty-night journey to Horeb, the mountain of God. He finds a cave and spends the night there waiting for a word from God. And then comes the reading we heard today: The voice of God came to Elijah, all right; but the voice was not in the tornado-like wind, or the devastating earthquake, or

the blazing destructive fire. The voice of God was the sound of sheer silence.

In other words perhaps God didn't respond to Elisha at all, but just ignored him or chose not to speak to him. In fact when Elijah leaves the cave, God tells him to go and anoint a new prophet, Elisha, son of Shaphat, to take Elijah's place. In other words, because the prophet's attitude was so smug and self-sufficient, so arrogant and self-satisfied, he lost his status. Elijah was 'too full of himself.' Like Peter in gospel who figures that if Jesus can walk on water so can he, Elijah thinks that the things God has done through him are actually Elijah's own doing. His own pride went before the fall.



It takes humility to realize that everything we have, all that we are, comes from the hand of God. There are forces in life over which only God has control – our life and our death, nature and creation, the winds and the weather. All we can do at times is humbly stand before these forces and acknowledge our place in God's plan. God is the Creator; we, merely God's creatures. Thomas Merton, the noted Trappist monk once said: *My only task is to be what I am -- a man seeking God in silence and solitude with respect for the demands of my vocation, and fully aware that others too are seeking the truth in their*

*own way.* It is to the humble and receptive heart that God will respond. And even when God does not respond, our task is to remain vigilant and to live in faith, no matter how little that faith may be at times. We seek the God of consolations, not the consolations of God.



Dramatic displays make for a good show, but when it comes to a life lived in faith, hope and love, nothing is as powerful as a hand reaching for Christ when we think we're sinking, or a mind and heart stilled in peace, listening for the quiet voice of God always speaking in our hearts.

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