

Sunday, August 7, 2011
Lectionary 19
Proper 14

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 19:9–18
Psalm 85:8–13
Romans 10:5–15
Matthew 14:22–33
Year A

I.N.I.

Calm to the waves. Calm to the wind. Jesus whispers, "Peace Be Still." Balm to our hearts. Fears at an end. In stillness, hear his voice.

We are together in this space. This space I, and others, sometimes like to call the **nave**. Related to the word *navy* and *navigation*, the space where the gathered assembly is can be rightly compared to a boat, *navis* Latin.

But is it safe, or disconcerting, to be in a boat?

Isn't the boat on the water in motion, ever forward, sometimes subject to wind, to strong current, rocking, listing, bobbing, threatened by storms that rage and foam?

Are you comfortable in your pew, or are you feeling a little queasy?

If the church is likened to a ship, then do you think it is an accident that the gospel storyteller Matthew included the details of the boat beaten up by waves, the powerful wind, the sinking Peter, and the yanking Jesus pulling the desperate disciple back into the *navis*, the nave, and then, only then, did the wind stop? I think not!

In the face of turbulent waters, the ancient source of chaos, an uncontrollable force, that phantasmagorical Jesus, full of himself, sashaying on the sea, announcing to the disciples scared out of their minds "It is I," "Don't be afraid," has to be a little tiny bit awe-inspiring.

In this nave, this boat, on our way in the water, we dare to worship the God made known in Jesus the Christ. We honor and praise the God who splits rock and crackles fire for Moses, and who for desperate fugitive prophet Elijah blares away in sheer, utter, **silence**. As if we can get our heads around that!

Annie Dillard wonders if we have any clue what we are getting ourselves into by claiming to be tight with God, by giving voice in ritual and song, by gestures that link us to the divine. She says, famously:

I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea of the power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may walk someday and take offense; or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return. –from Teaching a Stone to Talk

You'd think Elijah would get it, after providing for the widow at Zarephath down to her last meal and her son raised back to life after breathing his last breath.

You'd think Elijah would get it. You'd think that Elijah would be the pacesetter, Elijah, Yahweh's main man scoring a victory over all the Ba'al priests by scorching the altar with the twelve stones and the wood and the water doubly pour over, so the blaze even as it says "licked up the water that was in the trench," the trench dug around the altar.

Come on, Elijah, you've sulked under your tree. You've thought you'd be better off dead. And, and, you've been nourished by an angel **and** been at Mount Horeb forty days, which is biblical speak for a **long time**, **and** you think you, with all that God-stuff going on are all alone and destined for the dump.

Jesus extends a hand to sinking Peter.

Yahweh extends an awesome presence in mysterious silence to Elijah.

We are in the boat of the church and we navigate the waters of the world around us with great company, with the holy. Jesus full of himself comes to us and yanks us from our sinkholes. God continues to make a way to wherever we have holed ourselves up, with a little nourishment for the road ahead, even if it means a change in course like giving over our mantle to someone else, someone younger, someone we would never even think of as leadership material. And as if for emphasis, after Elijah like other complainers that we might know or sometimes be, God might say there are seven thousand, there are plenty more that yearn and commune and connect and are safe in me. You are not alone, Elijah, Peter, Joanne, Ruth.

The ancient Jewish parable tells of Baal Shem-Tov, the great rabbi who loved his people. If he sensed his people were in danger, he would depart to a place in the wood near a great tree, light a special fire, and say a mysterious prayer. And always without exception the people he loved would be saved from danger. Magid of Mezritch became leader after Baal Shem-Tov passed on. As his teacher before him, whenever Magid sensed a danger for the people, he would go to a place in the woods near a great tree. He would say, "Dear Lord, I do not know how to light the special fire, but I know the mysterious prayer. Please let that be good enough." And it was, and the people were always saved from danger. The Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov came to lead the people when Magid passed on. And each time he heard the people were in danger, he would go to the place in the woods near the great tree. He would say, "Dear Lord, I do not know how to make the special fire, I do not know the mysterious prayer, but I know the place in the woods near this great tree. Please let this be good enough." And it was and the people were always saved from danger. Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn came to lead the people when Rabbi Moshed passed

on and whenever the people were in danger, he didn't even get out of his armchair. He shrugged his shoulders and could only bow his head and pray, "Dear Lord, I do not know how to make the special fire. I do not know the mysterious prayer. I cannot find my way to the place in the woods near the great tree. All I know is the story, please let this be good enough." And it was, and his people were always saved.

All I can say is I feel stronger when I am together with the worshipping assembly, whether my voice is strong or feeble. I feel as if the church, in order to survive, in order to thrive, in order to continue to fulfill its mission, is not to apologize for its shortcomings, nor wallow in self-pity, but to continue to tell the story of good news, to be the hands of Christ in serving those in need, and to be open to the prompting of the divine, by getting out of the way sometimes, or by going to the other side, trying something new, recognizing power and strength and presence in community, in church, in the neighborhood, in the noise of speech, and in the gift of silence.

I.N.I.