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1 Kings 19:9-15a

Matthew 14:22-23

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***1 Kings 19:9-15a***

***9At that place he 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.”***

***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.”***

Many of you have possibly been to a seder meal on Passover before, either re-enacted in a Christian setting to explain how a Jewish tradition is connected to our Easter traditions. Or perhaps at the home of a Jewish friend during the Passover holiday. At that dinner you might remember that the children at the table, specifically the youngest child, plays a role in the retelling of Jewish history that is the seder meal. When the table is set, there is always a chair and a place setting that remains empty. The place is for Elijah when he comes. At the end of the dinner the youngest child runs to the door to look for Elijah. Jewish tradition teaches that Elijah the prophet will be the harbinger of the coming of the Messiah and the world’s redemption. It is a chair of hope.1 Given the central role of Elijah the prophet, I’d say it’s a good thing that he came out of that cave.

As a prophet of Yaweh, the living God, Elijah made a lot of enemies because he spoke against followers of all of the other gods. The King and Queen of ancient Israel, Ahab and Jezebel, were followers of many ancient other gods, chiefly Baal, so they were targets of Elijah’s prophecy. When chapter 19 first opens in 1 Kings, Queen Jezebel has just told Elijah that she will kill him within 24 hours. Elijah flees and eventually thoroughly discouraged, goes far into the wilderness and finds a cave to hide in. Inside the cave, God’s voice came to Elijah and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Like any good reporter we could hear that question in a few different ways. WHAT are you doing here, Elijah? You’re a prophet; you can’t be the voice of a prophet while in a cave. What are YOU doing here, Elijah? Some say the cave is the same cave where Moses hid before he saw the burning bush. Same cave, different messenger for God. What are you doing HERE, Elijah? You’re not supposed to be here, you’re supposed to be in Israel. Elijah then answers all of these versions of the question. I’ve tried my best Lord, but the Israelites “have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.” I am the only one left and they’re coming for me now! I had to leave! Then the voice of the Lord said to Elijah not to stay in the cave, but to go out and stand on the mountain because the Lord was about to pass by.

But Elijah didn’t do that. Maybe Elijah knew the stories from the Exodus and how Moses hid in a cave and there was a burning bush, and when Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness God led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Exhausted, discouraged, Elijah knew what the presence of God was like. So he stayed in the cave. Sure enough, along came a great wind, shaking the stones. But that wasn’t God. Then a great earthquake. But that wasn’t God either. Then a fire, but still no God. Then…Elijah heard something else.

I wonder if you’ve ever heard anything like it. Thinking back, I think I might have. When I was a chaplain I had a week or so when I spent several hours on a floor that was not my usual assignment. Maybe you’ve heard of hospitals that have something like this in place. Known as the VIP floor, patients were given letters as identification. Patient Z. Patient Y, etc. These were patients who needed ultimate privacy because of who they were. Politicians, celebrities, hospital bigwigs maybe. It was a way to limit contact with any except the necessary personnel, probably to limit the chit chat and rumor that would go round with the knowledge that they were there. I only went to that floor when called and for that week or so, there was one family who wanted the chaplain with them whenever the family and the doctor met. This was the reason that I spent more time than usual in those hallways. A room I passed by every day but never entered was that of an elderly woman who was at the end of her days. The room was always silent and empty except for the patient. I always said a quick prayer on the fly on my way past the room. One day I was hurrying past on my way to a call, but stopped in my tracks, and knew instantly that the woman had died, maybe even just then. It was such a powerful feeling that I imagined that the staff didn’t even know it yet. Seeing the room from the hallway I felt this huge sense of nothingness. The musical trio, the Roches, sing a song called Big Nuthin’ and one line is “I guess I just never knew how big nothin’ could be!” It’s this paradox of something that is actually defined by the *lack of*, actually being *full of* so much. In that cave Elijah heard the sound of sheer silence.

This is another example of all of the parables we have been looking at in the last few weeks about the kingdom. In all of the parables, the kingdom of heaven was found in some unexpected manner or place. For Elijah too, what was expected was not what happened, and what happened never would have been expected! The mustard seed, the treasure in a field, the pearl of great value, the weeds and the wheat – all these *parables* about being small or big like the mustard seed; being useful or a hindrance like the weeds and the wheat; recognizing value and having to have it, like the treasure or the pearl of great value; The story of God finding Elijah in a new way, getting Elijah’s attention in a manner that suited Elijah, is another story that acts out the way in which God loves us back to life with God. When Elijah does come out of the cave, there is the Lord, asking Elijah again the same question as before and again getting the same response from Elijah that he gave the first time. The text George read ends with the Lord giving Elijah new instructions to go back and continue God’s work with the Israelites.

God will do what it takes to meet us where we are – for Elisha, fear kept him inside the cave. When he felt safe, he came out, and God was there after all. “You can run but you can’t hide?” Drew Elijah out and gave him an assignment. No matter what kind of dirt we are, no matter in which field we live, no matter the outward expectations of us, God can make it work to God’s purpose.

Now. Let’s put Elijah in a time machine and put him in the boat with Peter and the disciples.

After the confusing introductions that would happen – like Peter saying to Elijah, “Wait. You mean *the* Elijah?!” we can use this imaginative opportunity to reflect on the scene in the Matthew text, from different perspectives.

Elijah would be very familiar with appearances of God being dramatic and unusual events. Pillars of cloud or fire, a bush that is burning but not consumed, tremendous wind, or damaging earthquakes, or tremendous fire. Seeing someone walking on water would be astounding to Elijah, but it might at least make sense.

Elijah’s context is ancient history to Peter. In the world of the disciples, God’s presence was not associated with natural occurrences quite as much. In Peter’s world men studied the world of Elijah, teachers taught about the ancient ways of God. Faith was becoming a cognitive exercise. People would study, learn, and teach. The world of the disciples is told through examples of work, fishing, laboring, farming and through relationships. Those extra-ordinary events made their way into stories less often. To the disciples, a man walking on water wouldn’t make any kind of sense at all.

Remember the year when we had an eerie orange night time sky at 9am? Here was this phenomena that we could explain away scientifically by talking about the ash blocking the usual filters that our eyes use to define colors, etc. etc. And even as we explained it away we made jokes about pigs flying and raining frogs to try to contextualize this strange thing into something biblically apocalyptical or something from a fantastic imagination. Generally labeled “impossible” we nevertheless saw it, it happened.

Our perspective determines whether a man walking on water is a miracle and signifies the presence of God – Elijah would say “of course;” or whether a man walking on water is impossible therefore there must be some explanation. The disciples and you and I would be in the latter category. Impossible, but I see it therefore I’m caught between using what I know to try to explain it, and not knowing enough to come up with a satisfactory explanation. The fact that something that crazy demonstrates the presence of God is the last thing that would come to mind. We realists who want proof for everything would assume that the water was shallow and it only appeared that he was walking on water; or we were dreaming; or some crazy invention was being used; or that it was a trick of the sun, etc. Some of us would run out of explanations and accept that it was a miracle, eventually. Some would never see it that way.

Our perspective combined with our level of trust is what will see us through these strange times in our world today. Between trusting the news, trusting a system, trusting someone’s word, trusting the future, we humans are a suspicious lot. Our faith cannot only be a cognitive exercise. We know what we know, we can be curious and always looking to learn facts. But the real story is in our hearts. We have to begin to open to a new perspective. One in which our heart recognizes experiences of God, the word of God, through whatever our activities are.

Earlier I mentioned that the empty chair for Elijah at a seder, is a chair of hope. We need to ask ourselves if our hearts have a chair for Christ, a chair of hope.

Amen.

1<https://cantorsue.com/2021/05/19/the-empty-chair/>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19/commentary-on-isaiah-551-5-7>

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-08-07/matthew-1422-33/>