

Sermon Pentecost 10, Proper 14, Year A 2023

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Open us, fill us, help us. Amen.

The Hebrew Bible story we read from 1st Kings today is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. Here is the context: It is early in the ninth century before Christ. That's just a hundred years or so after the David and Solomon era in the Bible. The once United Kingdom of Israel in the north and Judah in the south is now divided. The ruler of the northern kingdom is Ahab and his wife is Jezebel, one of the most powerful and notoriously vengeful women of biblical times, seen by many as the quintessence of evil. The people there are worshiping their god Baal (Bay'ul) and have forsaken the God of Israel. The prophet Elijah, who insists on the exclusive worship of Yahweh, has condemned them for idolatry and social injustice, and has also killed their prophets. Jezebel in her fury sends a messenger who tells Elijah that she will kill him. As the scripture says, "Then Elijah got up and fled for his life." In the reading today Elijah has escaped in fear, is running for his life, and comes to Mount Sinai, also called Mount Horeb, where he encounters God. Listen again to his encounter there: "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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." It was in the silence that Elijah heard God's voice, the "sheer silence." I love that passage because silence and solitude is where—as those of you who have participated in our contemplative prayer classes know—I too enter into that mystery of God, and most easily encounter God.

Scripture is full of similar references to finding God in solitude and silence. From the book of Job, "How small a whisper do we hear of him" (Job 26:14) Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God." From the 23rd Psalm: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul." (Ps 23:1-3) Jesus frequently went off by himself to pray in

silence. From Luke 5: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” (Luke 5:16); and from Luke 6 “Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.” (Luke 6:12) From Mark: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35) And from John: “Jesus...withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” (John 6:15) Then from the Acts of the Apostles: “Peter went away from his traveling companions to go into solitude and silence and seek God.” (Acts 10:9) Jesus himself told his disciples this about how to pray: “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6:6)

The gospel for today is about Jesus walking on water during a storm that is threatening to sink the boat carrying the disciples. They are terrified, and then they see a man walking on the water toward them. They think it is a ghost and they cry out in fear. But Jesus says “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter answers him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says “Come.” And Peter does, and actually begins walking on the water himself, but soon becomes frightened and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out and saves him, then says “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Most of the sermons you have heard on this gospel probably have something to say about faith in times of trouble, but today I want to back up to the beginning of the story. The chapter in Matthew before the storm and before the walking on water is about Jesus feeding a huge crowd of 5000 hungry people with five loaves of bread and two fish. When they have finished Jesus makes the disciples get into the boat while he dismisses the crowds. What does he do next? “He went up the mountain by himself to pray.” So what I want to talk about today is the power of silence and of solitude in prayer.

The great mystic Saint John of the Cross said this: “Silence is God’s first language.” The 13th century Persian poet Rumi put it well when he said:

“Silence is the language of God; all else is poor translation.” Father Thomas Keating added this to Rumi: “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is poor translation.” Keating helped develop the contemplative prayer practice of centering prayer, in its essence seeking God in silence by clearing the mind of all thoughts and emotions, and by letting any distracting thoughts that arise gently go, staying unattached to them, and returning to the present moment, entering into the mystery of God.

Rumi also said this: “Not the ones speaking the same language, but the ones sharing the same feeling understand each other.” Not **speaking**, but rather **feeling**. I think this gets at the mystery of God, the unknowability of God, the namelessness of God, beyond our capacity to fully understand. And yet real, as real as the wood of this pulpit. I believe that to connect to that mystery we have to as Rumi said **feel** it at the level of the heart, beyond what our thinking analytical mind can do. So it’s not so much knowing about God or even believing in God on an intellectual level. It’s more about feeling God’s presence at the level of the heart. We do this best, I think, in prayer without words, simply praying by being present to that unknowable Presence which is always there, in us and around us and through us and everything in creation, every person, every object in nature, every movement of the wind, every wave on the shore, every sunset, every moment.

And it’s hard isn’t it? We live in a world of incessant noise, things like emails, text messages, social media like FaceBook and Instagram and Twitter that can overwhelm us, not to mention to-do lists and sticky notes, phone calls from robots, television news, the list goes on. No wonder Jesus was always finding a mountain to climb, to escape the chaos and the crowds, just to spend a few moments in solitude and silent prayer. And we can do that too!

Father James Martin is a Jesuit priest and author. He is a frequent guest and commentator in the national and international media, including CNN, NPR, and The New York Times, among others. He has written several books including

Learning to Pray, A Guide for Everyone. One of the chapters in that book is “The Gift of Imagination.” This is a form of prayer in which you use your imagination to enter into a biblical scene, placing yourself somewhere within that scene, culminating with an encounter with God. The premise behind it is that your imagination is a gift that can be used to experience God. One thing Jim learned on sabbatical is that in the thinking of Coleridge and other romantic writers, and of others who preceded them, the imagination is the Spirit working within us. When we tap into our imagination we are tapping into the Presence of God within us. Other chapters in James Martin’s book include “Finding God at the Center” about the centering prayer of Thomas Keating that I mentioned; and “Discovering God in Creation,” about praying in nature. There are numerous methods of prayer, all focusing on encountering God. The encounters stay with you, remind you of who you really are—that being people filled with God’s Spirit, God dwelling within you—and guide you to act as the Christ through Jesus calls us to act. Indeed the reality of God dwelling within us is foundational to our faith. St. Paul said that our body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” one place where God resides, and that God’s Spirit “dwells within us.” What else is prayer other than encountering God in the depths of one’s being? But this is not about navel-gazing, nor is it about you and God alone, for any encounter with God can lead you outward, to the rest of creation, into the lives of people within the community around you. This is what happened to Elijah after his encounter with God in silence on Mount Sinai. God gave him instructions on how to re-enter the world to carry out his mission. And that is the beauty of these forms of prayer. Those moments provide a sense of Presence that if we allow it can stay with us through the day, into any activity you might have: work, recreation, mission work, feeding the hungry as in our Food Share, and like Jim challenging and confronting those in power in our community to seek justice—whatever you decide or are called to do. Those moments of prayerful presence can and will guide us in anything we do—in the **actions** of our day. The contemplative prayer

community Father Richard Rohr started is called the Center for Action and Contemplation. Note the word **action**. If our times of prayer do nothing but make us feel good, more comfortable, alone and “at one” with the world and God, then we have wasted opportunity and possibility. Those moments in prayer are like gas—or better electricity—to fuel our actions. Yes, Jesus often went away to pray in solitude, in the silence that nature provides, but he always came down from those mountains where he prayed alone, back into a world in need of healing and of love, the calm presence to allay the fears and struggles of the people around him. We see it in today’s gospel, when he calms the storm and in so doing allays the fears of his disciples in that boat; and in the preceding chapter when he returns from prayer to feed five thousand hungry people.

There is no shortage of storms in our own lives, and it is easy to feel that we are tossed about by them like the disciples in that boat with the wind and the waves threatening to sink them. New griefs, new fears, new potential disasters rise up and can wear us out. When we never step outside of this chaos, it is difficult to see beyond it. It becomes easy to think that is all there is, without hope. And yet Jesus models for us the acts of stepping away to pray, of getting quiet, and of returning with a steadiness that can meet those anxious voices within us, those distractions, without being consumed by them. The space to be quiet and reflect opens up new perspectives for us on what is possible and what God might be inviting us to do. It builds in us the spaciousness to meet others when they are in need. And while it may not be feasible for many of us to go to a mountaintop to pray, we can, wherever we are, quiet ourselves for a moment. We can take a deep breath when worries or fears arise, and ask Christ to be present with us, to fill us with that peace—that steady calm. We can invite that peace of Christ to remain with us as we reengage with the world and to give us fresh eyes to see the way forward and what is possible. And if we practice, perhaps we can begin to bring that calm to others who are facing storms of their own. Perhaps we can offer them that peace through our own steady presence.

All of this begins with just a quiet moment, a moment of encountering God and with trust allowing the Spirit within us to guide us and to show us the way.
(Last paragraph adapted in part from “Withdraw” sermon by the Rev. Lucy Strandlund)