

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 7 August 2011  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Today's readings include two vivid, well-known stories.

First, we heard about Elijah in the mountain. Elijah has just fled terrible persecution. There have been battles among competing political and religious authorities. All of the other prophets of God have been killed, as the Israelites have defected from their worship of God and their observance of the covenant. In Elijah's words, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away." Elijah has fled in fear for his life, and in despair that any good can come from his proclaiming God's word.

Here, far from any human habitation, far from any place of worship, the prophet is told to go out and stand on the mountainside as God passes by (just as Moses did on Mount Sinai). This must have sounded to him like another dangerous thing to do, since it was well known that one paid with one's life for seeing God. But he did it.

Imagine the starving, exhausted, frightened man standing in the mouth of the cave. He is too tired to resist or make an argument. As he stands there, first comes a terrible wind, like a tornado, causing avalanches, then an earthquake undoubtedly making more boulders fall. The prophet's footing must have been very insecure. I am sure he wondered if the cave would become his instant tomb. Still he stood there. Then came a fire ravaging the mountainside.

It is common even in scripture to see such great and terrible natural events as evidence of God, of the hand of God in the natural world. But Elijah did not see God in any of these cataclysmic events.

Finally came the silence - utter stillness, - no more crashing rocks, no shaking, no blowing, no burning - simply utter silence. And in that silence, that peaceful, unchaotic moment, Elijah encountered God.

Elijah was very brave. He went forth to meet the divinity in the silence, covering his face so that there would be no unauthorized seeing. And what did the voice of God say to him? "What are you doing here?" I can imagine being very frustrated at that point, and saying, "What do you mean, what am I doing here? I am here because you told me to come here to meet you. Everything I have done is because you told me to. And look what's happened?!"

But Elijah does not burst forth in frustration; he simply repeats his explanation for leaving Israelite civilization in favor of the wilderness: "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."

I alone am left - and they are trying to kill me. And so God accepts Elijah, speaks directly to him - and sends him right back into the fray. God is there for Elijah in the wilderness, in the quiet of his most private - and frightened - self. But does not let him stay.

In the Gospel, Jesus has been teaching the crowds. He sends the disciples on across the lake, while he dismisses the eager crowds to return to their homes and takes some quiet time for himself. Like Elijah, Jesus goes alone up the mountain to meet God. There is no evidence of fear or physical danger at this point – just the chaos of pressing crowds and eager questions and the endless need for healing. Jesus seeks God in solitude.

It is easy to imagine a peaceful mountainside, with no sound but birds and the wind in the trees, as the sun sets. One can imagine Jesus praying without interruption, not bombarding the Father with requests as he has been bombarded, but sitting quietly listening for God to speak to him. But in that silent contemplation, that peaceful respite from the chaos of eager crowds, he becomes aware of a rising storm. Looking out over the lake he sees that the boat carrying the disciples is being tossed about, and kept from land by an insurmountable head wind.

So Jesus does something quite unexpected, he goes to them, regardless of the intervening water. They are afraid and they need him – so he comes. This does not calm them down, of course, because they cannot imagine how anyone can just come out to a boat in the middle of a lake. They think it must be some sort of ghost – or perhaps an evil spirit. Their fear is magnified.

But Jesus is able to immediately calm them with his well-known voice. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

That personal address, that familiar voice change their perspective. They recognize that their Lord is there and they know they have nothing to fear from him, even if they do not understand how he can be there.

So then Peter has one of his characteristic moments of enthusiasm and decides that Jesus can let him walk on the water as well – which he does for a while until his very human doubts interfere with his trust in Jesus and he sinks like a stone.

But in the end they are all safely in the boat, the chaotic storm has stopped, and everyone’s confidence is restored.

In both of these situations, the divine comes to faithful individuals in the midst of chaos and fear.

God is there for Elijah in the sheer silence, more vivid than any natural disaster or human attack. God is there to meet him as an individual, to hear his story, to understand his fear and worry and hopelessness.

Then on the lake, Christ comes as the quiet in the midst of the storm. Christ is with them because they need him, Christ overcomes their fears with personal connection. In their recognition they find calm and confidence. It is a moment of epiphany for them, as they recognize in Jesus the presence of God among them.

In both stories, the presence of the divine brings peace, brings a direct connection to human individuals in difficult circumstances.

In these stories, God is not the source or instigator of the chaos or the confusion, but neither is God impeded by it. God is the still small voice, the quiet presence, the strengthening familiar voice.

In these stories, this encounter with divinity is not the end of the story. It is not finding peace and leaving all worldly cares behind. Elijah has to go back into a dreadful situation of conflict and even combat.

The disciples come to shore and go on with the work of following Jesus, all the way to the cross and beyond.

These encounters with the still place, the quiet voice, the silence provide abiding and encouraging connection to what is most truly real. They provide a rooting and a nourishment that makes it possible to live the lives they have been called to.

I find in these stories encouragement to be alert for God in improbable places. In my email this week, I received my periodic HeroRats update. I would never claim to find God in war, or in the horrible detritus of war, the land mines which blow up curious children and hard working farmers. These are a horrible, human-caused evil in our world, a willful chaos and destruction of life. But in the midst of the dispiriting chaos come the gentle, quiet, funny-looking rats. They with their remarkable sense of smell can easily discover land mines buried in a field or road. With their small bodies and dainty feet their presence does not cause the mines to explode. With their exceptional trainability and intelligence they let their people know where the mines are. And so the people are able to get rid of the danger. Countless lives are saved – and normal healthy human life can thrive. Children can play, farmers can grow their crops, people can travel the roads.

I believe God is there in the HeroRats, coming in the quiet, improbable presence. It does not end the human conflict or take people away from the responsibilities of their lives. It makes life possible, enables people to get on with the business of ending strife and building community.

Some people have great dramatic experiences of God. But often, more often, I think, God is to be heard and seen in the quiet, the peaceful, the improbable, even the comical. Like the blessing of the remarkable HeroRats.

If we are alert, train ourselves to stay still, look and listen, we too will find God come to us. Amen.