

Sunday, August 13, 2023
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14 Year A)

1 Kings 19.9-18; Matthew 14.22-33

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2036221246719189>

(Sermon begins at about 23:40)

“God’s Productivity Tools”

I would venture to guess that most of us are familiar with the feeling of being overwhelmed. Demands of work, home, personal life, plus other organizations or activities we are involved in, including church. And for many, add to that the demands that come with also having to care for the needs of other family members, such as elderly or infirmed loved ones, or helping take care of grandchildren. At times, there seems to be so much that we just don’t know how it is all going to get done. Because of this we hardly have time to catch our breath, to have a moment to ourselves. And, if you’re like me, under such circumstances when we don’t have time for one more thing, and certainly don’t have time for ourselves, where or how do we find time for God?

Thankfully, today’s Scripture readings provide some guidance on this very topic. Our readings from the First Book of Kings and the Gospel according to Matthew both take on the subject of the importance of relationship with God in the midst of the busyness of life. Particularly in the midst of extreme craziness in our lives. Which, frankly, seems to be ever increasing.

You think you’ve had a rough week or month or year. As we hear in our Old Testament reading from First Kings, the prophet Elijah is the posterchild for those dealing with stress and overwhelm. And even that is probably an understatement. Elijah has had such a rough time that he goes running for the hills. Literally. Elijah has been faithfully attempting to do the work God has given him to do—to issue prophecies and warnings to the leaders and the people of Israel, in an attempt to get them to turn around and return to their covenant with God. But to no avail. It has gotten so bad, he is on the verge of quitting. If anything, his going up Mount Horeb was partially to get away from the insanity, but also likely looking for God in order to tender his resignation. When God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” he responds, “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.” In other words, “this is not what I signed up for, this is not working, I want out.”

God’s response is a bit strange, at first glance. Instead of offering any substantive direction, any meaningful advice on how to proceed, God says to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” What follows is a series of dramatic events, starting with a great wind, followed by an earthquake, and then a fire. All events that have at one time or another been associated with or accompanied God’s presence, or God’s revelation of himself. And yet, God was not in any of those. Instead, God chose to make his presence known in “a sound of sheer silence.” While not specifically stated, God’s presence in this way is indicated by the fact that only when presented with sheer silence did Elijah cover his face. For it

was the belief at the time that one could not look on the presence of God and live. That one had to cover one's face when in the presence of God.

What immediately follows in the text is a *déjà vu* moment with God again asking, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah again laying out his complaints. Only this time, God lays out the plan for how Elijah is to proceed in fulfilling the work God has assigned to him. And this time, God includes an exit plan for Elijah. The way all this is presented, it is easy to gloss over the most important piece of the story: God's presence in the sheer silence. When Elijah experienced the silence, when he recognized that God was in the silence, as just noted, "he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." We don't know how long Elijah stood at the entrance of the cave, surrounded by the sheer silence that was God's presence. Not that it is particularly important whether it was mere seconds, minutes, or hours. The important thing was that he took some time in silence, to be open to God's presence. To be open to God's love.

Elijah's experience with God on Mount Horeb was an invitation to Elijah as to how to deal with what he was feeling—the stress, the overwhelm, the insanity of his life and work. And Elijah's experience is meant to be an invitation to us, as well, as to how we can deal with the stress, the overwhelm, the insanity, of our lives and work. That it is precisely at such times when we need to take a moment, be it only a few seconds or a few minutes, to enter into silence. To recognize that silence is the language of God. That it is in silence, when we seek to silence our own thoughts and concerns even for a brief moment, when God comes to us, wrapping us in his loving presence. Letting us know that even in the midst of the insanity, he is with us, supporting us, giving the strength we need to carry on. And I will tell you from personal experience, when I do take a few moments in silence, quite often, in the moment or following, like Elijah, I have greater clarity and insight into how to continue on. As if God has helped ease the burden, even if only slightly. Or perhaps, God has provided some needed perspective or insight that helps with whatever I am dealing with.

Jesus himself takes this same approach in his ministry. As we hear at the opening of today's Gospel reading, "after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray." Jesus has just come through a grueling period of traveling around the countryside teaching, capped off with the feeding of the five thousand. And in the midst of all that, he received news that John the Baptist had been executed. So he is drained, physically, mentally, and emotionally. The way he recharges is to seek time alone with God. We see this throughout the Gospels—that when Jesus needs to reenergize after a particularly hectic period, or when he needs to prepare for something challenging that is about to happen, he takes time by himself in prayer.

This practice that Jesus models of taking time in prayer as a way of dealing with the challenges of life is not limited to times of preparation or times of winding down after a period of activity. Our Gospel story indicates that this is meant to be an ongoing practice in the midst of life's insanity. After Jesus' time of prayer, he is ready to rejoin his disciples and jump back into the fray. Only now the emphasis shifts to the disciples. Primarily to Peter. We are told that the disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, heading toward their next opportunity for ministry. As the story goes, the boat is "battered by the waves." A wonderful and apt image for what

their lives and ministries are like. A wonderful and apt image for how our own lives can feel at times when we are inundated with demands from every side.

Jesus begins walking across the sea toward the boat. The disciples freak out at first, but are comforted when they find out it is Jesus. Peter decides to meet him part way. “So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out ‘Lord, save me!’” Notice what happened here. Peter was doing fine. He was walking on water. He was actually walking on water! But then he noticed the strong wind, which frightened him. And that was when it all fell apart. Up until then, he was doing great. He was making progress, as long as his attention was focused on Jesus. But when he became distracted, when he took his attention away from Jesus, then things took an unfortunate turn and Peter began to flounder. Of course, Jesus does save Peter, reaching out and catching him before it was too late.

This part of the Gospel account provides a valuable lesson for us in our own lives. Particularly during those periods when we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. That we are to keep our focus on Jesus. That as long as we maintain our focus on him, we will do fine. We will make progress. But when we allow ourselves to become distracted by all the other things that are going on around us, when we allow ourselves to be distracted by the “what ifs” and the resulting fears, that’s when we begin to struggle. That’s when we are more at risk of succumbing to the sense of overwhelm and are more in danger of sinking. Or, at least, floundering, of flailing around. Which is never productive.

Admittedly, it is hard to keep our focus on Jesus, on God, when we are feeling so overwhelmed with what is going on in our daily lives. But that is precisely when we need that focus most. And circling back to the example of Elijah, we see that sometimes all it takes is a brief moment of resting in the sheer silence that is God’s loving presence to give us the boost we need. That gives us the return to focus that we need to continue.

Nowadays, there is a proliferation of resources on productivity and time management; on setting goals and developing systems to implement those goals. Books, articles, and YouTube videos by self-proclaimed gurus that promise to help us become more productive, to accomplish more in a shorter amount of time, and to become more successful as a result. Don’t get me wrong. Such resources can be valuable in providing tools to help with the stress and overwhelm of our overly busy lives. In fact, I’m always on the lookout for that little gem that will change my life and help me be that much more productive and that much less stressed.

But truth be told, this whole productivity genre is nothing new. The fundamentals have been around for thousands of years, thanks to the likes of Jesus and Elijah. Seek to maintain focus on the Divine source of our life, who will give us the strength and the resources we need to carry on. Spend time in prayer, or just take a few moments here and there to rest in the sheer silence of God’s loving presence, which not only energizes us, but can even provide renewed insights to enable us to continue. These are the absolute essentials to guide and sustain us we engage in the work that God has laid before us. And if we follow them, we can have faith that, with God’s help, we will be more productive, more successful, than if we had tried to go it alone.