

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

This week we hear from the 1st Book of Kings about Elijah. One of the keys to understanding Elijah is found in his name. Elijah—Eliyahu—meaning **Yahweh is God**. This man's very identity is anchored to an absolute clarity about what is of ultimate value for him. It is found in his very name: Yahweh is God.

In many ways this is the principal question in the all the spiritual life. Who or what is your God? And by God here is meant: your ultimate value, your ultimate concern, and final absolute preoccupation. What, at the end of the day, matters most to you? When you can answer that question with complete honesty, you will basically know who you are.

Well, Elijah (Eliyahu) is a "YAHWEH man." He is ultimately and finally about God. Once we know this, we understand everything he says and does. It's why he challenged the king of his time—King Ahab, because the king had gone over to false gods. This is why Elijah called down the judgment of God upon Ahab; Elijah is only about the one, true God. It is why he did battle with the priests of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel. It is also why he is running from Queen Jezebel—she was not happy with what he did with the priests of Baal, so she sends the army after him. Elijah is a man of God, through and through.

Our reading today picks up his story while Elijah is running from the army of Queen Jezebel. He has arrived at Mount Horeb—another name for Mount Sinai; the same mountain on which Moses received the Ten Commandments.

He is told that God will be passing by. What follows is an impressive display of natural power *a strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing the rocks—an earthquake—a mighty fire*.

Even for us today those are pretty impressive forces. We've experienced here in NC hurricane force winds that knocked down large trees, tore apart buildings, and took down power lines leaving us in darkness. We can recall the earthquake-induced tsunami that devastated Japan no so very long ago.

So imagine how these forces must have impressed and awed ancient people, who had none of our means of protection. This is especially so when such events are threatening to life and livelihood directly. Imagine the impact on them.

If we read this story for its symbolic and spiritual lesson, as we should, the wind, the earthquake, the fire stand for all those mighty and impressive goods of this world; all of the powerfully seductive elements of this world that beguile us and capture our focus and allegiance. We all know them and recognize them in ourselves to varying degrees. They are greed for money and possessions; lust for physical pleasure and power; egotism that seeks the self before all else. All those things, that figuratively speaking,

can rend the mountains and crush the rocks; that can turn our lives upside down and even bring destruction.

Yet, the narrator of our story in 1st Kings tells us that the Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor the fire. The Lord, the true God, is not identical to any of these powerfully seductive elements of this world. Rather, we hear: ***There was a tiny whispering sound*** and when Elijah, a man of God, heard this he knew immediately that it was God.

Elijah, the God-obsessed man, is not preoccupied by the powers of the world—no matter how impressive they are. He knows that the true God has to be heard with ears that are very finely attuned. God's voice can be heard through the sounds of the world but is not any of the sounds of the world. God's presence can be discerned in all things yet God is nothing in this world.

You hear His voice as though it is a tiny whispering sound. Elijah's great virtue—which is the virtue of all contemplatives—is that he is able to tell the difference. He is not wowed and distracted by the immediately impressive values of the world. Rather, he listens, waits, discerns, discriminates, and is able to give himself to the true God completely and entirely.

That is why the image of Elijah on Mount Horeb is such a powerful one, especially for our time. This is a time when secularism reigns supreme. Secularism is best described in the context of this reading as the culture-wide lack of capacity to hear that tiny whispering voice of God.

Secularism is a totally systemic surrender to the mighty powers of this world: money, power politics, careerism, fashion and pleasure, to mention a few. What our current secular culture needs is a whole army of Elijahs who are true men and women of God.

Think of Elijah critiquing King Ahab, who had gone over to the worship of false gods. Hasn't our culture gone over to the worship of all sorts of false gods? What we need are Elijahs who are capable of discerning that tiny whispering voice—the voice of YAHWEH.

In our great gospel for today we find Peter and the other disciples in the boat. This image means we are dealing with the Church (The bark of Peter). This is all of us down through the centuries, disciples of Jesus, making our way through the world. They are met with great winds and a mighty storm that threatens to overwhelm them. So we hear an echo of the Elijah story here, but with a slightly different angle. Just as we can be defined by the seductive things that preoccupy and obsess us, so too we can be defined by the things that we fear.

We can learn much about ourselves when we can correctly discern those things that frighten us most. Perhaps we are afraid of losing our family, or our health, or our wealth, our position in society, our good name, or our very lives. These are all real and

common fears. What can happen though is that we become defined and determined by our worldly fears.

In the gospel we find Jesus, in the midst of the storm, walking on the water toward the boat. He identifies Himself in those familiar Greek words: *ego eimi*, I am. He is the divine power—YAHWEH in the flesh. He is the one who can ride out any storm, who transcends anything that frightens us. Peter now, at this best, has the eyes to see this. He keeps his eyes on Christ and for that moment he is able to walk on the water. When he looks away, when he identifies with what frightens him, that's when he sinks.

This is our spiritual lesson for us today. Do not identify yourself by what frightens you, but keep your eyes fixed on Christ. Do not define yourself by those powerful seductions of worldly things, but rather along with Elijah, keep your ears attuned to the tiny whispering voice of God.

How do we do attune our ears? By learning to shut out the noise with which we constantly surround ourselves. Can you ever get into your car without putting on the radio, or enter your home without playing music or turning on the television? Do you create quiet, meditative, and prayerful spaces of time for yourself everyday?

Along with your favorite novel, or sports magazine, do you include a book on spirituality and prayer; or a book on the scriptures, the sacraments, or moral theology? Do you give as much time to nurturing your faith as you do to your hobbies, pleasures, and pastimes?

If your answer to these questions is a resounding YES, then indeed, you will develop the ears of Elijah and the eyes of Peter. With Elijah, you will hear the voice of God above the din of this secular world. With Peter, you will recognize Christ, keep your eyes fixed on Him and you will never be overcome by your most abiding worldly fears. But if your answer is a resounding NO then today is the day to make some serious changes in your life.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella