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Was it part of a plan? Jesus had ordered the disciples to head out right away on the boat, while he went to the mountain to pray. Why worry? The group included some professional fishermen; what could go wrong? Did he have any idea that there was a gale in the offing? Carpenters weren't famous for their nautical knowledge. So, Jesus went off to pray.

While he was at prayer, the storm went to sea and Jesus knew how that tended to terrify his group of followers. When he thought about his frightened friends, what did he do? He headed out to help them the only way he could. Now, as if the storm weren't enough to overwhelm them, they saw him actually walking on the waves. Of course, they thought he was a ghost! There was no other sensible explanation.

As usual, only more so, the disciples didn't recognize Jesus for who he was: healer, bread-maker, lawbreaker, apparition ... none of the above, some of them all. Neither the disciples nor the religious leaders had the categories from which to understand him. All he could do for them was shout out "Take courage, it is I." His greeting said "I'm here for you."

This took place long before the Transfiguration. It was probably the first spectacular manifestation of Jesus as more than just one of the guys or rabbis. His sudden

appearance right at the time of their greatest need was a prayer answered. It might have seemed as if the script came straight from the psalms that use drowning as the symbol for our need of God. The scene has overtones of the kind of appearances of God we hear about in Scripture: “Through the sea was your way. Your path, through the mighty waters” (Psalm 77:20) and “He alone ... treads upon the back of the sea” (Job 9:8). At some point the disciples began to get the idea that Jesus had come as God for them.

So how did Peter respond? “If it’s you, let me do it too!” For a very brief instant he understood two dimensions of Jesus’ mission. In one lightening flash of insight, he realized that in all his greatness Jesus not only came from God, but also revealed humanity’s potential. Jesus hadn’t come to dazzle them, but to teach them that trusting in God would carry them where they never dreamed they could go.

When Jesus said “Come,” Peter took the invitation and did the impossible. Momentarily, he overcame his fear and his sure knowledge of how everything works. To the astonishment of his companions, and probably even himself, he went overboard. This was his second step in discipleship, a continuance of what he started the day that he left his own boat on the beach to walk with Jesus through the land.

But nobody becomes a saint — or even a disciple — with just one step. Too soon, Peter reasoned that he couldn’t do it. Nobody can walk on water — especially with such a headwind! Practicality took its toll and Peter began to sink. Suddenly, he was back to shouting with his psalm-singing ancestors “Lord save me!”

Jesus, taking hold of him, was likely thinking: “Why did you waver?” Peter had taken his second step, but he couldn’t quite hold to it. He had just seen thousands eat their fill from a little store of bread. He had just seen Jesus advance calmly over the chaos of gale and surf. But, only for the briefest of moments did he believe in Jesus more than in gravity.

Jesus got Peter safely back on board and didn’t start tutoring him in treading on water. Jesus never again invited him to embark on the sea without a boat. Not literally. But, Jesus’ call to give witness to his faith didn’t end with the calming of the winds.

Our world is in desperate need of witnesses to the possibility of living Gospel values. Much of our world is drowning in overconsumption and media distraction. Our

brothers and sisters are perishing from irrational violence and intolerable poverty, all in the shadow of scandalous wealth. Too many human beings, each of whom has a name and face cherished by God, languish on the margins of a busy world without anyone to gaze on them with the tenderness that alleviates loneliness, even if, it cannot cure their ills or relieve the pains of aging.

We aren't being asked to walk on water, but to act like we believe that God's love for us and in us is more powerful than chaos, evil and apathy. The Gospel challenges us to take on the storms of our day with a love and hope that will risk going overboard. The headwinds are fierce, but the force of God's Spirit is greater still.

1 KINGS 19:9a, 11-13a

If this reading were all we ever heard about Elijah we might think of him as a holy hermit, maybe even a quiet, gentle soul. This selection doesn't remind us that Elijah had just pulled off one of the showiest grandstand stunts in Bible history by getting God to make a soaked sacrifice burst into flame. Our opening gives us no hint that Elijah was running away. He fled to the cave where we encounter him because just after performing that fire caper, he oversaw the slaying of Queen Jezebel's prophets and she was dead set on getting revenge.

The passage in today's liturgy doesn't tell us that when his flight wore him out, Elijah lay down under a shade tree and begged God to just let him die in peace (1 Kings 18:21-19:8). While Elijah was thus resting and feeling sorry for himself, God sent an angel to shake him out of his lethargy. Elijah then took a 40-day trek through the desert to Mount Horeb (Sinai) where Moses had had his encounters with God. All of this is the immediate preparation for Elijah's experience in the cave that we read about today.

Elijah wanted peace and quiet, but God called him out of his hiding place. With a summons that would turn the knees of the bravest to jelly, Elijah is told, "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord." Can't we just hear him taking quick recourse in Psalm 24: "Who can go up the mountain of the Lord? Who can stand in his holy place?"

Elijah couldn't quite get himself to leave that cave. From inside, he heard the boulder-crushing storm, he felt the earthquake and saw the fire. Then, from outside his place of refuge, he heard a whispering sound. Coming in the calm after the

storm, this wasn't even an oracle — no words, just a sound. But somehow, Elijah knew what it meant. Hiding his face in his cloak, like Linus in the Peanuts comic strip with his blanket, he went to the entrance of the cave.

The reading doesn't tell us anymore. All we hear is that Elijah stood half-hidden at the entrance to the cave. He listened to God's gentle presence. That was enough. With that, he could go on.

ROMANS 9:1-5

In Romans 9, Paul deals with the disappointing reality that so few of his people have come to faith in Christ. Like parents who wonder why their children have left the church, he recounts all the blessings his people have received. Paul calls his people "Israelites," using the name bestowed on their ancestor Jacob who struggled with God. He then lists the advantages God has given them and them alone: They are God's adopted, chosen above all others; They were given covenants and the Law; God taught them how to worship; They are the people of the promise, and they have the patriarchs. In his anguish Paul wonders why they don't believe in Christ when their entire past prepared them for the Messiah. And, so one could ask: "What more could they have been given?"

Paul says he would give anything if only they could be brought to faith: "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people." He sounds just like his predecessor Moses who gave God an ultimatum: Either forgive the calf-worshippers or blot me out of your book! (Exodus 32:32). Both Paul and Moses sound like parents.

People of every generation share Paul's problem. We wonder why others don't see what we do. For some it becomes the poignant question: "If mine is the way to salvation, will all others be damned?" Nearly two thousand years after Paul, the church grappled with that question and came up with a response that opened a new Catholic approach to other faiths. With the Second Vatican Council and subsequent reflection, we acknowledge that we reach an intellectual impasse when we simultaneously profess that Christ is the Savior of the world and that God wills the salvation of all peoples, Christian or not. In this, the church has taken the path of intellectual humility. We trust that universal salvation will come about in ways that only God comprehends. Individual Christians are still called to be witnesses, but we aren't responsible to make all humankind believe what we do. (See statements by

the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews.)

Gaudium et Spes (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”) states that varieties of atheism are among the most serious human problems of our time (#19). That reiterates the concern that Paul and today’s families share. This document also lays part of the blame for contemporary atheism and agnosticism on the lack of credible witnesses among church members.

Where does all of this leave us in a society where the number of those who profess no religious belief, the “nones,” is growing faster than any denomination? Today’s Gospel offers us an example of the kind of witness the world needs.

MATTHEW 14:22-33

Doesn’t it seem a little harsh that Jesus would call Peter out as “you of little faith” when the other disciples did nothing more than hang on for dear life in their storm-battered boat? The interchange between Jesus and Peter is unique to Matthew and offers a meditation on Peter’s discipleship.

When Jesus first called Peter and his brother, he told them to follow him to become fishers of men. Now in this incident, there’s a carefully recorded dialogue. At the sound of inchoate cries from frightened fishermen, Jesus calls out, “Take courage! It is I, do not be afraid!” “Take courage” is the same thing Jesus said to the paralytic when he told him his sins were forgiven and to the woman who touched his cloak for healing (Matthew 9:2; 9-22). It really means “Rejoice.”

Why rejoice? Because Jesus says “It is I.” No student of Scripture can fail to recognize that phrase as an echo of the many “I am” statements we hear in John. (The Greek wording is exactly the same.) On one hand, Jesus is assuring them that he’s not a phantom. On another level, he is telling them that he, the Jesus they just left on shore, is the one who is there.

At an even deeper level, coming close to calling himself by the proper name of God, he declares that he is there for them.

Those layers of meaning give context to Peter’s reply, “If it is you, command me to come.” It doesn’t seem probable that Peter is saying “Prove this is no fantasy.” For that, he could have simply said, “Pinch me.” No, Peter was entering into a realm more mysterious than ghostly appearances. The simplest and most challenging

interpretation is that Peter was saying, “Let me come to you and be like you.” If so, that was a moment of blinding faith. Peter understood momentarily, that discipleship means walking like the Master, no matter how impossible it seems.

What sank Peter was his doubt, although the translation “wavering” probably offers a more appropriate explanation. A rather visual definition of the Greek word for doubt, *distazo*, says that it means to stand in two ways. Peter got caught between noticing the strength of the wind and the power of Jesus’ invitation. The wind and waves took their toll, but only until he called out for help.

A wonderful thing about this incident is that it’s not a success story. It’s a salvation narrative. This story speaks of the courage necessary for discipleship. It’s okay to be frightened in a storm. It’s downright heroic to risk stepping out of the boat and into the raging waters. Most of all, when self-confidence has dangerously overstepped its limits, the ability to call for and receive help is the real sign of faith.

The soggy Peter who got back in the boat was both humbled and empowered. He had learned, not for the last time, the truth that God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

If we use today’s readings as a guide to discernment about our times, we may decide to choose Peter as our patron of audacious attempts. Today’s tempests include the lack or loss of faith in our families and society as well as the intolerable violence and injustice that plague our world. We can hide from them or heed the voice that whispers or shouts, “Take courage! Rejoice!” Elijah allowed himself to be drawn from hiding in the cave, and Peter leapt into the depths that only Jesus could help him navigate.

The world needs witnesses willing to risk trying to walk like the Master, people whose way of living entices others to faith, people who continue in the struggle to proclaim the validity of Gospel values in spite of countervailing winds. We surely won’t triumph with every attempt, but this is about salvation, not success.

Planning: 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's first reading is a powerful one, reminding us that God's voice is heard not only in cataclysmic events but in still, silent moments. Many people are quick to interpret natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, fires and droughts as messages from God, usually condemning whatever behavior the interpreter has decided God should condemn — homosexuality, abortion, birth control, etc. That is clearly false prophecy, claiming God's authority for one's own prejudices or favorite topic.

One hopes that such preaching is never part of Catholic worship, but planners might ask themselves where they think God's voice can be heard during worship. Certainly, good preaching is an obvious focus for hearing God's word, and the proclamation of the readings themselves has pride of place in this realm. It is important, then, to make sure that the readings are proclaimed as well as possible, which means regular training and refreshing of lectors' (and deacons' and presiders') skills.

That first reading also points us to the importance of silence as a way to hear the Lord. Elijah was expecting to experience God's presence in flashy displays: strong wind, earthquake, fire. That's what Moses had experienced on Horeb (Sinai) long before. But instead, the prophet recognizes God's presence in "a tiny whispering sound." That could also be translated as "silent sound" or perhaps "the sound of silence."

Planners, presiders and musicians need to embrace and foster times of silence within worship. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* sees silence as the environment for the whole Liturgy of the Word. It recommends silence before the first reading, after the first and second readings, and after the homily. It is into this silence that the word of God is proclaimed, allowing it to be heard more clearly and more deeply. The Missal also calls for silence after the communion procession.

Liturgy promoters are rightly concerned about the active participation of the whole assembly in the words, songs and actions of the liturgy. Liturgical worship is something we are called to do together, even when we might feel more inclined to spend the hour in quiet individual prayer. But active participation is not always loud and exciting. Listening carefully and entering into silence is also part of our active participation. Indeed, it is essential if we are to avoid a superficial experience of worship that does not really touch our minds and hearts deeply and powerfully.

In today's Gospel, God presence is felt in the midst of a storm, but notice that it was the quieting of the storm that revealed the divine power at work in Jesus. Sometimes, we need to quiet the atmosphere at worship too.

Prayers: 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's readings remind us that God speaks to us and beckons us in so many unexpected and surprising ways. Some of us may respond better to an almost indistinguishable whisper, while others need a wake-up call that requires great courage on our part — like Peter's call to walk on water. Hearing, seeing, giving our full assent to what we experience, may not be easy. But the message has been consistent throughout history: God continues to invite us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you appeared to your disciples on the stormy sea: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you commanded Peter to walk on the water: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to have the courage to come to you: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Brothers and sisters, let us pray to be open to God's call, however it comes to us.

Minister For the whole church: that we may be a community ever open to God's call ... we pray,

- For those who feel unworthy or doubt God's love for them ... we pray,
- For those who feel betrayed by others: by family or institutions, by government or the church ... we pray,
- For those who continue to advocate for peace, despite setbacks ... we pray,
- For the patience and courage to respond to God's call especially in times of doubt ... we pray,
- For the openness to help others when they are afraid or doubtful ... we pray,
- For those who suffer from the summer heat or the effects of climate change ... we pray,
- For all in this community who are sick, dying, grieving or in any kind of need ... we pray,
- For those who may know God only through the love and ministry of this community ... we pray,

Presider Gracious God, you have loved your people unconditionally and called us in countless and surprising ways. Be patient with us when we are hesitant, relentless when we resist, forgiving when we fail to respond. Open our eyes and ears, hearts and minds to the gifts you have prepared for us. We humbly ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

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