

PAY ATTENTION

A sermon for Proper 14a, August 9, 2020

St. Andrew Victor Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22ff - Julian Gordy

In the 1972 British movie *The Ruling Class*, Peter O'Toole plays an English Lord who thinks that he is God. A psychiatrist asks him, "How do you know that you are God?" "Oh," he responds, "One day I was praying and realized that I was just talking to myself."

Most of us would have to admit that, sometimes we feel the same way when we pray. Is God listening? Does God care? When I read about Jesus feeding 5000 people with a miraculous multiplication of bread and fish or walking on water to greet his terrified followers in their boat, I wonder why such awesome events do not happen in my life? Why isn't one of my prayers answered in such an obviously miraculous way? And I think that, should such a miracle occur, then my faith would be built up and I would have no doubt that God is there and interested in my life.

Of course it doesn't work like that. If you read it in context, our first lesson is evidence that witnessing a miracle doesn't necessarily strengthen faith for long. Just before we find Elijah whining in the cave, afraid of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, he had been a part of one of the most spectacular manifestations of God's power in any story in the Bible. He had prayed and God had sent down fire from heaven to burn up a sacrifice along with the stone altar it was on, and even the dirt around it, all of which had been drenched with gallons of water.

And Elijah's prayer had brought it all about. Now, just a few days later, he seems to have completely forgotten about the great event and is terrified of the retribution threatened by Jezebel, who was not happy with Elijah because he had brought about the death of Baal's prophets.

You wonder, if Elijah witnessed God defeating the prophets of Baal with such spectacular fire from heaven, why couldn't he - just a short time later - trust God to protect him from Jezebel? Why did Elijah need further proof of God's presence with and for him?

Today's gospel lesson offers another example of the same thing: Peter witnessed Jesus miraculously walking on water and actually began walking on the water himself. But mid-walk, the wind and high waves seemed so threatening to Peter that his nerve failed and he began to sink.

Why is it that, even when dramatic proofs of God's existence and power come to us, their value is usually limited and their impact temporary?

Many of us can remember a time or times when God's reality and power and care for us were demonstrated, maybe when we or someone we loved recovered from an illness against the odds or when some disaster that seemed imminent was averted. But if that was a while ago, and things seem threatening again, we find ourselves like Elijah, feeling alone, vulnerable, doubtful.

At times like that, I find it comforting that even Jesus felt abandoned on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Maybe what we really need is not an occasional miracle on *God's* part, but a constant openness to the presence of God on *our* part.

Elijah covered his face and stood in the doorway of the cave on Mt. Horeb looking for God in the rock-shattering wind. It was spectacular, but God was not in the wind. He looked for God in the earthquake. It was terrifying, but God was not in the earthquake either. He looked for God in the fire. It was awesome, but God was not in the fire.

God turned out to be present for Elijah in the sheer silence, the "softly whispering voice"¹ - something inside him, something easily overlooked or dismissed as nothing at all.

Peter wanted to see Jesus' power over nature displayed when he got out of the boat to walk on the water as Jesus had. He wanted to do the amazing deed and then, I suspect, join in the praise of power shared. "Yo, Peter! Yo, Jesus! Good job. Alright! - walking on water!" Instead, he experienced salvation in Jesus' hand reaching down for him in the darkness and pulling him from the dark water.

Just so, we often overlook the real signs of God's work in the world. For some reason, an instantaneous cure following on the heels of prayer seems more like God's work than recovery from illness that comes about through the normal processes of the body's wonderful immune defenses or the intervention of medicine or surgery.

But are they not all equally the work of God? Is God not just as much the author of those natural processes and medical skill as the doer of amazing miracles? And isn't God just as present when the curing of disease doesn't come? Can we not, if we are paying attention, notice the hand of the Lord reaching out to us in compassion and healing even when a miracle doesn't occur?

That is what we see on the cross. Jesus died. God did not send the heavenly armies to save him. But, still God was present there on the cross and in the grave to bring life out of death.

¹One of many possible translations of the Hebrew.

Even when we are surrounded by the wind and the waters of disaster - God, the Creator of the wind and water is there also, to hold us up, to bring us to a better place. And even when we face death, God the author of life promises us that death is not our end.

When I was in my first call as a parish pastor, a very active member of the congregation had a heart attack on a Sunday morning in the middle of the sermon. Sitting in the back of the small nave, Red made a sudden noise and collapsed on the pew beside his wife.

Two members of the congregation vaulted over the pew and began CPR. Someone else ran into the office and dialed 911. In seminary, they don't teach you what to do when someone dies in the middle of a sermon. But I invited parents to sit with the terrified children in the assembly and to pray with me for Red and those caring for him.

It would have been a good place to see a miracle! I remember thinking, "Wouldn't it be appropriate, wouldn't our congregation's faith be given shot in the arm if somehow, during our prayers, a miracle happened and Red was to health? "Ah!" we would have said. "God is great! God is here!"

But that didn't happen. We prayed, but Red died a few minutes later in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

Still, in time many of us began to see that God was there with us that Sunday morning. God was there reaching a hand to us in the darkness and the hurt.

From my perch in the pulpit, I saw God working in those who rushed quickly to perform the CPR they had practiced against just such a time. God was there in those who brought comfort to Edith, Red's wife of nearly 60 years.

God was at work in those who held the hands of frightened children. God was there in those who offered those silent prayers for Red, for Edith, for the community. And God stayed with us through the week in the tears shed and the food brought in and the help offered. God was present in neighbors and friends who continued to be there for Red's family, ameliorating the loneliness, and celebrating his life.

It may be harder for us to notice God in the small things, the everyday wonders, the quiet places, but that is no reason to believe that God is not with us.

Not long ago I read an article commenting on the great increase in the number of birds that people are reporting showing up in their yards and neighborhoods during the pandemic. One ornithologist pointed out that there are not more birds showing up.

We are simply noticing them more because it is quieter these days and because we are paying more attention.

Paying attention. "Perfect attention is prayer," wrote French philosopher Simone Weil. "Be still and know that I am God," says the Lord.

In our world, attention - perfect or otherwise - is rare, being still is rare. We are plugged in most of the time. We are piling obligation on top of obligation. We are busy!

Perhaps during this pandemic, we are being given a chance to pray, a chance to pay attention to the natural world, to the people around us, to God - whether God is present in earthquake, wind and fire, or in the sound of sheer silence we encounter when we are willing to be still and listen.

Once God showed up on earth in Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us. And God is always showing up in our world, creating, restoring, saving. God continues to be the still small voice whispering in the silence, the hand reaching out in the storm. When you pray, you are not just talking to yourself. Pay attention and you will learn that God has not abandoned you or this world God made and loves. Amen.