

**Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**August 13, 2017, Year A**  
**Father Mike Holloran**

Some days you wake up and say, “Good morning, God”. Other days you wake up and say, “Good God, it's morning.” That's pretty normal, but if there are lots of dreadful mornings, you start to feel burdened, even overwhelmed, like you can't take it anymore.

Elijah felt like that. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had been leading Israel astray into idolatry, some of which involved human sacrifice. Elijah had been sent to call them all back to the covenant with Yahweh, and things were looking good for a while. He even prevailed in his confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Then it all went south. Jezebel swore to kill him and he fled for his life. On the run, he cried out to God,

“I have been most zealous, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they seek to take my life.”

“This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”

(1 Kings 19)

In his flight from Jezebel, Elijah went as far as Mount Sinai, called Horeb in today's reading, where God had made the covenant with Moses and people Israel centuries before. At that time, God had used the forces of nature that pagans worshiped as gods to display His almighty power. The mountain shook with a mighty earthquake, then it seemed to be aflame, sending a great cloud of smoke billowing into the desert sky. These forces were not gods. They were mere signs of the presence of the one true God.

Centuries later, here was Elijah, back at Sinai, about to give up on his mission to call Israel back to the covenant, and he encountered the same natural forces on the mountain. To him they seemed like expressions not only of God's glory but of his own stressful life. A crushing wind, earthquake, fire-- “Yep! That's my life, and I can't take it anymore!” But the Lord was not in the wind, or the quake, or the fire; the Lord was in a tiny whispering sound that reassured him, encouraging him to carry on.

God had not been battering him, demanding the impossible, putting him in danger. The circumstances of our lives can do that. Other people do that. We often do it to ourselves. But God? He has drawn near to us, to guide, encourage, and save.

God, whom the ancients thought to be distant, unknowing, and uncaring, has drawn near to us. How near? Well, God, the creator, has always been near to us. He gives continuing existence to the universe, moment by moment, permeating everything. That's pretty near. But pagan humanity didn't know this, so God began to reveal His intimate presence, finally by becoming one of us, our human brother, born of the Virgin Mary. He came to reveal the Father's love, so his disciples needed to know who this really was walking the dusty roads of Galilee with them, sitting in their boat, sharing their meals and their hardships like an intimate friend. To tell them who He was, he walked on the water.

Without the benefit of modern physics, however, ignorant of quantum mechanics and the weird things that are possible in this universe, they thought he was a ghost. But chances are, they would not have found the insights of modern physics reassuring at that moment. They needed help!

Jesus called out to them, "Take courage, it is I." Translator's note: what is here translated as "it is I" would more literally be translated as "I am". "Take courage, I am." This could be an intentional use of the formula "I Am Who Am" which God used when Moses asked His name. The consonants of this formula in Hebrew is the source of the name "Yahweh".

If this is what Jesus meant when he said, "I am" while walking on the water, then what he was saying to his disciples was not, "Hey, it's okay. It's just me." No, he was saying "Take courage, don't be afraid. I am the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and sea."

Walking on the water might have been enough to reveal his divine identity, but the action also references several passages of the Old Testament. Psalm 77 says, "Your way, O God, led through the sea, your path through the deep waters, and no one saw your foot prints." (v. 20)

And Job, speaking of God, says, "He alone stretches out the heavens and treads upon the crests of the sea." (Jb. 9:8) So by walking on the water Jesus was not just showing off. He was referring to the Jewish Scriptures to confirm his identity; and was telling His disciples "I am the Almighty, near to you, even in the storm."

If Peter understood it this way, (and why not? he was a Jew who had heard these Scriptures read in the synagogue) then he was saying back to Jesus "If you are the Almighty, make me walk on the water. I want to be with you, and like you!" And the Almighty said "Yes. Do. Come!"

Peter believed and he walked, transcending by divine power the usual laws of nature. Peter doubted and began to sink. Peter believed and cried out, "Save me, Lord!" And as quickly the Lord grabbed him up out of the swallowing sea and heaved him into the boat.

We believe and we doubt, we doubt and we believe. That's being human, and our Creator doesn't hold it against us. But He does want us to know that He is near us, helping us, right in the midst of those troubles that seem so overwhelming sometimes that we want to give up.

Don't give up. Grab hold of His strong hand reaching down through the water to grab you. Hang on through ups and downs, good days and bad. When faith makes you confident, don't let go. When doubt makes you despair, don't let go. Hang on and you will tread with him upon the crests of the sea, even over the waters of death, and arrive with him safely on the other side.