**Weekend of Sunday, August 13, 2023**

**11th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 19/Year A**

**First Reading: 1 King 19:9-18**

**Second Reading: Romans 10:5-15**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:22-33**

**Sermon Title: *“Faith Empowers and Transforms”***

**Theme**

*Elijah finds the presence of God not in earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. When the disciples face a great storm on the sea, they cry out with fear. Jesus says: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Amid the storms of life, we gather to seek the calm presence of Christ that soothes our fears. In comforting words of scripture and in the refreshing bread and cup of the eucharist, God grants us peace and sends us forth to be a sign of God’s presence to others.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: 1 Kings 19:9-18**

9At [Horeb, the mount of God,][Elijah] (aka Mt. Sinai) came to a cave, and spent the night there.
  Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for 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.”
 11He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for 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.” 15Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. (East of the Jordan; modern day Syria) 16Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; (it would appear that Elijah never did this) and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. 17Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. 18Yet I will leave seven thousand (symbolic number) in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

**Second Reading: Romans 10:5-15**

*A right relationship with God is not something we achieve by heroic efforts. It is a gift received in the proclamation whose content is Jesus Christ. This proclaimed word creates our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence Christian proclamation is an indispensable component of God’s saving actions.*

5Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” 6But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) 7“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8But what does it say?
 “The word is near you,
  on your lips and in your heart”
(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
 14But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” My last children’s message at Grace/Arlington

**Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33**

 *(Jesus was previously in Nazareth, the west side of the Lake. From there, Tabgha NW shore, where the Multiplication happened)* 22[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds.23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”
 28Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” After the storm, they landed in Gennesaret, near where they had started from.

**Sermon**

Stressed is a mysterious state of being. All of us have experienced it from time to time; some more than others, and that is based on many factors including our vocations, occupations, our relationships, and how we have learned to deal with it, or not. Indeed, stress symptoms can affect our bodies, our thoughts and feelings, and our behavior. Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can help us manage them. And stress that's left unchecked can contribute to many health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. So that’s my PSA for the day. Now back to our regular scheduled program.

The heroes of our readings for today are stressed, some more than others, and we can find some help for our stressful lives from their stories in a sermon I have entitled, *“Faith Empowers and Transforms.”* These scriptures offer us profound insights into our journeys of faith, reminding us of God's presence, our calling, and the importance of stepping out in faith.

In the First Reading from 1 Kings (19:9-18), we encounter the great prophet Elijah, a man who has previously been used to demonstrate the awesome power of God to lead the Israelites to incredible victories. He had first-hand eye-witness experience of God's power, but now he finds himself running for his life, disillusioned, and tired of it all. Has this ever happened to you in your moments or seasons of stress? Things in your life are going down the porcelain vortex and so you get melancholy, depressed, unable to function? I wonder what you did. Most of the time I got myself in that position in the first place, so I blame myself, and I’m embarrassed, and initially, it *never occurs* to me to turn to God.

Amid his despair, Elijah

1. ran from his problems,
2. ran up a mountain (I’ll come back to this in a moment), and
3. turned in on himself – he is totally lost in his own situation and has chosen to feel sorry for himself - *“nobody likes me, everybody hates, sitting in the garden eating worms.”*

But in this situation, God takes action. God reaches out to Elijah and asks him a question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

You see, I told you that running up the mountain was significant. The mountain that Elijah ran up is called Mt. Horeb in our reading, but it is also known as Mt. Sinai, and Mt. Sinai is known as the Holy Mountain of God – the place where Moses communed with God for forty-days and was given the Ten Commandments. Now it's not that God “resides” up there and nowhere else. God, as we all know, is omnipresent. During our stressed-out moments, it would be wise, yes, wise of us to do exactly what Elijah did – run to the place we know we can find God. I hope it’s here, this is your sanctuary. But maybe you have experienced spiritual communion with God somewhere else. Maybe the place you find communion with God is not a physical place at all, but more of a spiritual place, like Christian radio, singing hymns, reading the Bible, or praying. Whenever we find ourselves stressed out, that is where we should go.

Sometimes, in the face of trials and challenges, we might feel the way Elijah did—alone, lost, wondering what we're doing, maybe even feeling abandoned by God. But God's response to Elijah reminds us that God is *always* near, even when we don't see Him – even in “sheer silence.” Please notice that God isn’t absent in the “sheer silence.” I wouldn’t pretend to know the mind of God, but isn’t it probable and just like our God, to give us “sheer silence” to give us time

* to calm down,
* to give us an opportunity to think,
* to come to our spiritual senses, and
* to prepare us to listen to God?

Well, that is exactly what happened in Elijah’s case. Then God instructs Elijah to go back down the mountain, to keep advancing the cause of the Kingdom of God, and assures him that he is not alone, there are others who also remain faithful. Let us remember that even in our darkest moments, God is with us, and He has a purpose for our lives. Indeed, in faith, we must believe that God has a purpose for all our moments: our victories and failures; our wellness and sickness; our joys and sorrows; our life and even our death.

In the Gospel Reading from Matthew, we find the well-known account of Jesus walking on water. But to appreciate what is really going on here, I have to set the stage for you.

Earlier in this same chapter, Matthew 14, Jesus learns that his cousin, John the Baptist, was beheaded. But when he seeks out a deserted place for himself to commune with his Father and deal with his stress, the crowds follow him, and as we learned from last week’s Gospel Reading, “he had compassion for them and healed their sick.” And of course, then what follows is the feeding of the five-thousand, last week’s Gospel Reading. This week’s Gospel Reading follows directly.

Matthew wrote,

22Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he dismissed the crowds.23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone

You see, in Jesus’s fully human nature, he feels stress too. But he knows what to do about it. He seeks communion with his Father.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in a boat, struggling against the wind and the waves. But though they are scared for their lives, they are not alone. Jesus is aware of their seemingly perilous situation and comes to them.

You just have to love Peter! He wants to “get Jesus” so badly and fails time after time. This time, impulsive Peter, filled with faith (that’s a good thing), asks Jesus to command him to come to Him on the water. As Peter steps out of the boat, he experiences a miraculous *moment* of walking on water. But as soon as he shifts his focus from Jesus to the storm around him, fear takes hold, and he begins to sink. Jesus reaches out and saves him, and reminds him of the power of faith.

This passage teaches us that stepping out in faith may involve risks and uncertainties, and it may add stress to our lives, but as long as our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we can do the impossible. We must not allow fear to stress us out or hinder our progress. Instead, let us trust in God in Christ’s power and grace, and step out in faith, knowing that He is with us every step of the way.

Briefly moving on to Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes about the power of proclaiming the good news. He emphasizes the importance of sharing our faith with others and bringing the message of salvation to those who have not heard it. Paul tells us that faith comes from hearing the message and that the messengers are essential for this process. And indeed that is true. But if you have ever actually given your testimony of faith, you will find that it builds faith in us! Yes, and moreover, the first time you try to tell someone about God, Jesus, or your life of discipleship it may just come out as a mess in your mind. That is not our responsibility. 1) The Spirit will intercede for us. And 2) articulating your faith hones your testimony. And 3) if and when we do this, we will find that our stress level is reduced, because we have just affirmed our faith.

PIC Now, I’d like to take a moment of personal privilege. It was twenty-seven years ago this week, that I completed my year of pastoral internship at Faith Lutheran Church in Arlington VA. I had a great year of learning the vocation and for my last Children’s message, I invited the children to come up and take off their shoes and socks. Then we talked about what Paul said about beautiful feet. I remember telling them that people have all kinds of feet – fat, narrow, long, short, and sometimes smelly.

Paul quoted the OT prophet Isaiah (52:7). Listen to the entire quote.

7How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
 who brings good news,
 who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Honestly, I am embarrassed about my ugly feet. But my feet have been made beautiful by bringing the good news! Are your feet beautiful?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

How beautiful it is that we have been entrusted with the task of sharing the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ! Each of us has a unique role to play in God's divine plan, and when we step out in faith and proclaim the good news, lives can be transformed – almost always, our own. Let us not be silent or complacent, but rather bold and confident, knowing that our words and actions can bring hope to a hurting world.

Today we have been reminded that amid despair, God is near, and He has a purpose for each of us. We have been entrusted with the incredible responsibility of sharing the good news with others, and our words and actions can bring hope and transformation. And when we step out in faith, keeping our focus on Jesus, we can accomplish the extraordinary. May we be encouraged by these passages, and may they ignite a fire within us to live a life of faith, boldly proclaiming the love of God to the world. Let us go forth with confidence, knowing that we are not alone, and that God's power is working in and through us. Amen.

**Prayer**

Faithful God, you are LORD of our lives. In faith, we know that whatever you want us to do is profitable for us and your Kingdom, and yet, we often lack the faith to see you beside us guiding us along our ways. Once again, we ask you to increase our faith so that others may see you through the ministry we do in the name of your Son. It is in his name we pray. Amen