Sermon preached by

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“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

They are Jesus’ words to Peter as he hauls him out of the raging sea. “I told you to take heart, Peter; I told you that you didn’t have to be afraid, so why did you doubt?” The Gospel does not tell us what Peter said as he spit the water from his mouth and grabbed for Jesus’ hand, but it doesn’t take much imagination to guess his reply. “Why did I doubt, Lord? Because the water was up to my neck and the boat was tossing like a cork for nine hours, and there was a tail wind so strong I couldn’t stand. Why did I doubt, Lord? Because for a moment there I was walking on the water, and that was the last thing I wanted. I wanted safety, Lord, more than a miracle. I wanted to be on dry land or at least in a boat that wasn’t rocking. I wanted to be saved *from* the storm, not walking on waves in the middle of a storm.”

Peter’s answer is our answer too. Why did I doubt, Lord? Because I was frightened, because my child was sick, because I lost my job, because my spouse no longer loves me, because my life is drained of meaning, because church isn’t the way it used to be, because the world has become so scary what with racist violence in Charlottesville and North Korea’s a nuclear threat and our President talks of fire and fury. We of little faith don’t yearn to walk on water but to have the earth steady under our feet.

Sometimes we would rather stay in our sinking boats than walk on water, and sometimes we take a few steps in faith and get scared and sink. Sometimes we prefer doubt to faith because faith means we’d have to do something, to wade out into the deep water where there’s nothing to hold onto except God.

Look at Elijah in today’s reading. For many years Elijah had fearlessly and tirelessly proclaimed God’s word to the people of Israel, confronting wrong whenever and wherever he saw it even in the king’s palace. When wicked King Ahab and the equally wicked Queen Jezebel rose to power, Elijah boldly confronted them and their corrupt court with the idolatry and injustice they had unleashed in the land. But then one day, ironically, just after Elijah had won a mighty victory over the prophets of Baal, the yes-men of Ahab and Jezebel, something seemed to snap within Elijah’s spirit. Suddenly, the once intrepid prophet was overwhelmed when Jezebel issued Elijah’s death warrant. The prophet ran out of courage. He just couldn’t face the struggle any more and fled into the Sinai wilderness and hid himself in a cave on Mt. Horeb.

While Elijah may have given up on being a prophet, but God does not give up on Elijah. God comes to the cave where Elijah cowers and asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It’s like Jesus’ chiding question to the faltering Peter. “Why did you doubt, O you of little faith?” God is saying to Elijah, “Didn’t I call you to be my prophet in Israel? What are you doing in this cave in the wilderness?

Elijah answers with a tale of woe. I’ve tried my best, Lord, but you don’t know how hard it has been with these Israelites. “They have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with a sword. I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away.”

God refuses to sympathize. You aren’t listening to me, Elijah. All you can hear is your own sad story. Get out of your cave and stand on the mountain because I am going to tell you something you need to hear.”

Now Mt. Horeb where Elijah waits for God to speak is the very place where Moses had encountered God and received the Ten Commandments. So if anyone were looking for a place to find God, Mt. Horeb was certainly the place to go. How would God now be revealed?

Well, first God sends a great wind, a wind so strong that it sets the mountain shaking with boulders rolling into each other and breaking into bits. But Elijah does not find God in the wind. Then God sends an earthquake which makes the ground heave beneath Elijah’s feet, but Elijah does not find God in the earthquake. Then God sends tongues of fire to sweep across the mountain; Elijah does not find God in the fire. Finally, there is nothing but absolute silence, a silence so profound that Elijah can hear only the beating of his heart and the sound of his breath, and in the silence Elijah finds God.

God speaks in the depths of Elijah’s being, asking the same question as before, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It is the question the prophet would like to escape. Elijah knows in his heart that God has called him to be a prophet; it is the meaning and purpose of Elijah’s life. Fear and self-doubt have overwhelmed Elijah’s prophetic calling but the calling is still there and Elijah knows it. When Elijah repeats his excuse for having abandoned his vocation, God will have none of it. Instead of sympathy, God gives Elijah fresh and clear direction: Go back where you belong, Elijah; I have work for you to do. Having heard God’s voice, Elijah goes down from the mountain with renewed vision and courage and returns to Israel to do as God has instructed him.

The first piece of good news for us in today’s Scripture stories about doubting Peter and fearful Elijah is that we are not alone when we are overwhelmed by the storms and struggles of life. The heroes of our faith were overwhelmed as well.

The second piece of good news is that, though we may sometimes feel that God has deserted us, the truth is that God is always with us. Jesus comes to Peter and the other disciples as they are tossed about in the waves. God comes to Elijah hiding in his wilderness cave. God comes to us and stays with us, even if we feel alone and abandoned.

But so often we don’t know, really know, that God is with us. And so our prayers become so full of words and so full of ourselves that they leave no room for God. But when loneliness overwhelms us and hollows out our hearts, when we cry out like Peter, “Lord save me. I can’t make it on my own. I don't have all the answers. I need you,” God will answer. And it is then that, like Elijah, that we must wait humbly in silence, to hear God’s voice.

The final piece of good news in these stories is that God has work for us to do. Jesus saves Peter and the other disciples from drowning because he has called them to go into all the world to proclaim God’s boundless love. God reaches out to the frightened and dispirited Elijah to recall him to his vocation as a prophet in Israel. God speaks peace to the faithful people gathered here this morning at St. Mark’s, New Britain, to remind us of our calling to be about God’s work of healing and hope in this community. God has put us here for a reason. God has work for us to do if we will be still and listen.