

Pentecost 4C

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*Time to Retreat*

Today we get the third installment of the saga between the prophet Elijah and King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Jezebel is furious because in destroying the power of the Baal prophets he has made her husband look weak and ridiculous. Elijah's prophetic witness has gone too far this time. Realizing he is a marked man, Elijah decides to run. Into the wilderness, he goes. Running out of steam, not knowing what else to do or where to go, Elijah begins to pray, "I've had it. I'm through," he says to God. "I can't do this anymore. I can't measure up to my predecessors. I'm all alone. I give up."

Yahweh, however, does not leave Elijah to die out there in the wilderness. God does what God always does- God provides. Unexpectedly, Elijah awakens to find himself in the presence of an angel who not once but twice ministers to him in the wilderness. He is fed and replenished for the journey ahead. Elijah's forty days and nights bring him to Mount Horeb, a place where Moses had come seeking God. And there on the mountain, completely worn out and discouraged, wracked with doubts about his ministry, God comes to the prophet. Elijah encounters the divine presence not in some mighty force, in wind or earthquake or fire, but in the sheer silence which follows them. There, in the stillness, or as one translation says, in a still, small voice Elijah finds God. And it is there in that holy sound of silence, in that calm after the storm, Elijah is reenergized for the work he has been chosen to do.

This story reminds us that in the midst of our weariness, when we are tempted to give up on our ourselves or our ministries God is there to provide for us. It also reminds us that when we are tempted to think we have to carry on with this work all on our own, we are not actually all on our own. God is there waiting to minister to us, nourish us, and reenergize us for the journey ahead. This story teaches us that retreating isn't always a bad thing. In fact, going into the wilderness is exactly where we find sustenance for the journey. And it is there that we can finally hear God calling out to us in that still, small voice, beckoning us to slow down long enough to find rest and renewal.

Every once in a while I run across a book that becomes holy scripture for me-that is I hear God speaking to me through the text. This year I found such a book: *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers*. The author Kirk Byron Jones, who is also a Baptist pastor, talks about the struggles we clergy face in trying take care of ourselves and in keeping good, healthy boundaries so that we can be faithful shepherds of our flocks. He bases his book on the story in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus and the disciples are on a boat at sea in the midst of a raging storm. The disciples are afraid and upset because Jesus is in the back of the boat asleep. Jesus does eventually appear to calm the storm. Jones imagines that after a long day of healing and teaching, Jesus went to the back of the boat to rest and to pray. He believes that Jesus was able to be present to the disciples' fear and to calm the raging storm because he had first allowed himself time in the back of the boat.

Clergy, Jones, says, cannot have effective ministries if they do not have time in the back of the boat, time for retreat. He goes on to say that there are blockades that get in the way of time in the back of the boat. Clergy too often get caught in the trap of feeling like they should be indispensable or somehow invincible in their pastoral roles. The

final blockade for ministers, Jones believes is the denial of personhood. "Many of us clergy are overly driven; many of us live exclusively through our gifts and ministerial offices," he writes. "Thus, many of us need to be liberated from the tyranny of measuring life only in terms of what we do. Before you are a minister, a preacher, a teacher, a pastor, and even before you are a parent, spouse, or friend, you are a child of God, a person whom God loves unconditionally."

Jones' insights struck a chord with me. I want to be the kind of minister that gets in the back of the boat. I'll be honest with you, though. Too easily I can let these blockades keep me from getting there. The more I reflected on Jones' words the more I realized that all of us, not just those of us clergy types, need to make time in the back of the boat. Whether we experience this in our careers, our roles as parents or spouses or maybe in our roles here as members of St. Peter's, we can get caught in the traps of indispensability or invincibility. And I imagine that many of us need to be liberated from the tyranny of measuring our lives only in terms of what we do! We all need to be reminded that first and foremost we are a beloved child of God.

Both Elijah's experience and Jones' words reflect what we need to be doing as a community-that is retreating. We need to enter into the wilderness for awhile in order to slow down, and reconnect with our God and God's purpose for us as a people. We need to carve out time in the back of the boat so that when we are weary and discouraged, angels can come and minister to us, feeding us for the journey just beyond the bend. If we keep running so fast, doing so much, while at the same time not stopping to reflect, to pray and to engage God in the silence, we will become run down ourselves. This is why I am asking and inviting all you to engage in these conversations with me over the summer about our common life. How do we need to find ways to be replenished and sustained for the journey? How are we being called to live more

faithfully as stewards of our time and our talents? I believe that an intentional period of reflection-of retreat, will make us a healthier community and will renew us for the ministry God is equipping us to do together.

Jones writes, "The back of the boat is that place where we can remember who and whose we are. What matters in the back of the boat is that we receive a refreshing of mind, body and spirit. What matters is that we are at peace with ourselves and with our God, regardless of life's circumstances. What matters in the back of the boat is that delight is found, not in what we produce, but in what we can, if only for a moment, open ourselves to receiving occasionally." I pray that together we can foster a community which allows all of its members, clergy and laity alike, time in the back of the boat so that we can open ourselves to the presence of God and God's unconditional love for us.