

“A Tiny Whispering Sound”

8/13/17, St. Ann
Fr. Jim Plough

Revision of “Taking Risks,” PLOUGH SHARES I

Let’s begin with Elijah, our first reading (I Kings 19: 9—13). Elijah means “my God is the Lord.” This name is in direct response to King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, whose god was Baal. Our reading tells us that Elijah took shelter in a cave. He was not avoiding an afternoon mountain shower he was fleeing for his life. He had outdone the 400 prophets of Baal, humiliated them in their presence, humiliated Queen Jezebel who held them in great favor. Jezebel now sought revenge. Elijah was quaking in his sandals, hoping that God would rescue him, as he had done before. When told that “the Lord will be passing by,” Elijah hoped it would be with an armored tank and an army of soldiers. There was plenty of noise, wind, earthquake, fire – reminders of how God had been present on Mount Sinai giving Moses the Ten Commandments. But the Lord was not in the wind; the Lord was not in the earthquake; the Lord was not in the fire. The Lord was not in an armored tank, not in an army of soldiers to rescue him. The Lord came by in utter stillness; the Lord was present in the sound of silence; the Lord was present in Elijah’s emptiness.

When we are fearful for our very lives, desperate, lost, and alone, the Lord may not come as a strong resolution to our problem, as an effective solution. He may come in utter silence, in the stillness of the night, hidden from our sight. But we will still take strength from his presence. Like Elijah, we may hide our face in our cloak and stand at the entrance to the cave. We will know that the Lord is passing by.

Consider one of Grace Noel Crowder’s poems that speaks of a reservoir that needs filling up, . There is a slow rain. She proposes: “Hold up your cup, dear child, for God to fill. He only asks today that you be still.”

That’s a lovely metaphor. It’s starting to rain after a long dry period, one or two drops and then more, and you turn your cup up and gradually, drop by drop, the cup begins to fill again. Those of you who are hurting, grieving, in sorrow, or just struggling with something, the poem says that maybe you must need to sit awhile

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and rest, and turn your cup up to the Lord, and little by little, let your dry reservoir fill up again. Be still Be still.

In our second reading, St. Paul was feeling forlorn for reasons other than those of Elijah. He said “I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart (Romans 9: 1-5).” Paul was the consummate Jew, proud of his heritage, proud to regard Jesus as the fulfillment of the history of his people. But that people had now rejected Jesus. Paul felt alone, torn from his roots, rejected by his own people, rejected like Jesus. This alienation from his own people pained him; he felt wounded personally, baffled by their refusal to see the light.

We are baffled by the loss of so many, our own family members, who no longer practice the faith. Why have they given up, sold out their heritage? How can God allow this to happen? We are invited to stand like Elijah, holding our face in our cloak and waiting at the entrance of the cave. We will know that the Lord is passing by.

Now, a story about a pagan philosopher of some note, a man with a reputation of some fame, yet he’s unhappy. His life is a shambles, his religious doubts are plaguing him, his personal life is a disaster His relationships – with the woman he is living with and his illegitimate child – are strained to the breaking point. He’s depressed. To throw him into further despair, he’s just receive news that two common Roman soldiers had converted to the Christian faith. Here these ignorant soldiers have found something and they’re happy, and he, Augustine, the great intellect, is in a terribly depressed state. Dejected, he goes into his garden and just sits under his shelter. Great man that he is, he puts his head in his hands and he simply weeps.

As he’s weeping, he tells us that he hears a small voice whispering “Take and read; take and read,” on the other side of the garden fence So in a half daze he goes into the house and picks up the Christian Bible, and in his own words in his

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autobiography, he says: “I seized, opened in silence and read that section on which my eyes first fell: ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ No further would I read, nor needed I for instantly at the end of the sentence, by a light, as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”

Finally, Peter’s alarm as he saw how strong the wind was and how he was beginning to sink. “Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14: 22-33). This plight is a neat parable about the life of the church. Yes, it’s clearly about riding out the storm. The church often faces stormy times. That’s part of our history and we are certainly no stranger to that reality today. But perhaps there is an element here that we have not recognized before. Peter was willing to get out of the boat in spite of the stormy sea; Peter was willing to take a risk. The church was willing to risk the updating necessary at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis, in his bold and courageous writings in opposition to much of our current culture secular culture, takes a risk of alienating his own members. The church needs to be bold today. The Lord should not have to stretch out his hand and say to us: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” We need not look for wind and fire to rescue us. The Lord may come in a tiny whispering sound. Again, the lesson to learn in times of being at the end of one’s rope is to be alert to the small signs. So, in bad times, be still! Be still!