

Pentecost 12
August 6 & 7, 2005
Sermon

God puts on a dazzling display of pyrotechnics, light and sound. Elijah is not impressed. All the power and the glory just don't cut it for Elijah. I get the feeling that had Elijah been in the boat with Jesus' disciples he would have broken out his Shania Twain and sung, "Okay, so you can walk on water; that don't impress me much." We meet Elijah today near the end of his story, so we might not know much about him. Elijah lives at a time when the Israelites have turned to worship Baal, the anatomically correct bull statue and god of Canaan. Elijah has just defeated and killed the prophets of Baal, and now he's on the run from the biggest Baal-booster of them all, Queen Jezebel. She's determined to kill Elijah for killing her prophets. Elijah, terrified and abandoned, has asked God for permission to die. Considering this it should come as no surprise that God's special effects demonstration does not cheer Elijah. He needs something to jar him loose from this world's grip.

What apparently seizes Elijah and draws him out of the cave is something that our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates as "the sound of sheer silence." The meaning of the Hebrew phrase *qol dihmamah daqah* is elusive. Just what it means we're not sure. Is it a voice? Is it God? The text does not say. First there is a great wind, but God is not in it; next there is an earthquake, but God is not in it; then there is a fire, but God is not in it; finally, there is the sound of sheer silence. Friends of Christ, that sound of sheer silence is powerful enough to

seize Elijah precisely because it is described so cryptically. The first three elements are named with such clarity and God's presence therein denied so firmly that the sudden ambiguity of the sound of sheer silence screams for our attention. It is so cryptic that it becomes our obsession. The author of Kings does not tell us that God was in the silence, or *not* in the silence, so the silence perches there at the mouth of the cave demanding that we struggle to understand it.

The Word of God provokes us. It challenges us. It confuses us. We struggle to understand it. In this manner the Word of God seizes us. It jars us loose of the world's hold and draws us into God's presence. The Word of God is how God reveals God to the world. The concept of an eternal, unchangeable Word is appealing to us in times of trouble. Words carry flexible meanings, however. Our tone of voice, the situation in which we use words and the context of the sentence give words nuances. The Word of God is often ambiguous. It swells like the waves of the sea, challenging us. In the famous story from St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus, the Word Incarnate, challenges Peter. Here before Peter is a man, a finite creature, possessing the ability to do the impossible: to walk on water. Peter faces the challenge, but it is a struggle. Soon, he begins to sink. As soon as he does, though, Jesus pulls him out of the water and scolds him. Yet even Jesus' admonition is a challenge to us. He calls Peter "Little-Faith", seemingly an insult yet rendered almost affectionately, as a nickname. That ambiguity challenges Peter and it challenges us all over again. The Word calls us to struggle. When we slip and fall, the Word picks us up again and straightaway challenges us to struggle again.

The sound of sheer silence draws Elijah out of the cave. It is an ambiguity in the Word of God, and by struggling with the ambiguity Elijah is drawn into God's presence. The voice asks for a second time, "What are you doing here?" Elijah repeats his previous answer word for word. "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Only now that Elijah's faith is challenged can his faith struggle and understand, as best as faith can, what God wants. In Elijah's case, it is his next and final prophetic mission.

Here, today, God is revealed to us in the Word and Sacrament and in this community of faith, the Church. According to the Lutheran Confessions, the Church is by definition the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel, the Word of God, is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. The Word of God makes us the Church. The Word jars us out of this world; it seizes us and engulfs us in the presence of God. It challenges our modes of thinking. The Word flows like a raging river and the currents can carry us into dangerous places. The Word sends Elijah back into the World, into the teeth of the political powers he has fled. The Word sends Elijah to anoint a foreign king to invade Israel, to anoint an illegitimate man as the legitimized King of Israel, and to anoint a successor to the post of prophet.

Elijah knows, though, that there is no safer place than to be carried by the Word of God, for even in that final prophetic commission God promises to redeem

Israel. Friends of Christ, in the Word of God we have the promise that God justifies us, we who cannot do anything to merit our salvation, we who are lost, God loves us so much that God sets aside all the power and the glory in order to make things right. In the sacrament of Baptism we have the promise that God has named us and claimed us, that God has joined us to the baptism of Christ, to the life of Christ, to the death of Christ, and on the last day to the resurrection of Christ. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion we have the promise that Christ is with us always, that we are united with God and with all the saints who have lived, are living, and are yet to come; we eat and drink our very forgiveness. In the Church we live as a part of Christ's Body in this world. We receive the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we work together, as best as we are able, to usher in the Reign of God by ministering to one another as God would have us do.

It is those places where the Word provokes us, challenges us, and, yes, confuses us, that our faith, the faith of Christ, is nurtured and grown. The faith of Christ does not put its hope in false security. The faith of Christ does not cling to lifeless idols. The faith of Christ is a faith that struggles. The faith of Christ fights to figure out where God is taking it. The faith of Christ swims in the great River of the Word. Like Saint Peter it rises (and sometimes sinks) to the challenge. Yet the Word is always there, drawing us ever onward. The Word flows on like a river, challenging us to struggle, yet the currents carry us to our salvation. Amen.