

*Delivered Sunday August 9, 2020  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church*

*Readings:*

[1 Kings 19:9-18](#)

[Psalm 85:8-13](#)

[Romans 10:5-15](#)

[Matthew 14:22-33](#)

*Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.  
Amen.*

### Moving Forward Into God's World

In today's reading from I Kings, we find the prophet Elijah in a situation that hits close to home. He's isolated. Concerned about his safety. Facing an uncertain future that has his mind spinning like a hamster wheel with fear and anxiety.

In the scene preceding this one, Elijah essentially curled into fetal position, overwhelmed with despair due to the state of the world. "It's just too broken, Lord! Either fix it or take me out of it! Please!"

But Elijah isn't as alone as he thinks he is. In fact, he's not alone in his self-isolation at all, because God is with him. An angel shakes him out of that fetal position and feeds him, giving him strength to keep going. And at the start of today's reading, Elijah finds himself sheltered in none other than the mountain of God itself.

God is also with us right now, as we self-isolate and ride out our own fear and anxiety and despair. This has been a regular theme of our worship since the world turned upside down, and we can't hear this good news enough. God is with us in this awful pandemic! That means there's hope! Alleluia!

In her sermon last week, Sarah suggested we spend some time thinking about how and where God is meeting us these days. For me, it's been on my morning walks.

These walks are early, before the heat kicks in. I heard out in my most comfortable mask, which is really just an old T-shirt, my mind spinning with my own fears and anxieties. The rise in COVID cases here in Virginia. Kids missing out on school this fall. All the people hurting for money, especially now that the extra unemployment benefits are up in the air. The protestors doing their necessary and risky work in this health crisis. And don't even get me started on the election.

Let me tell you: Sometimes I get sad enough to cry. I think about how all the days seem the same, and how I just want to hug the grandchildren, or go out with friends, or plan a trip. All

those small daily joys we took for granted, the ones that softened the edges of our days and helped to give life some meaning.

But then, I feel the breeze. I notice how unbelievably blue the sky is. I hear birds singing all around, and sometimes catch sight of one when it lands on a branch and cocks its head at me. That hamster wheel in my mind starts to slow down, that cloud of despair begins to lift, and I know: We are not alone in this. The God of all creation is indeed with us, as close as that breeze on my skin, as expansive as the sky, as observant as the bird in the tree.

There's a great line in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, spoken by Blanche DuBois, the main character. When Blanche experiences an unexpected kindness, she cries out, "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!"

Yes, Sister Blanche. *Preach*. God is always there in our difficult times, revealing the divine presence in unexpected ways that keep us going.

But our God does more than comfort us—and that's the focus of this meditation today. The Elijah passage reveals that God is also pushing us forward, back out into that dangerous world, with nothing less than divine work to do. Work that Sarah called "holy service" in her sermon last week.

See, God lets Elijah sit in his self-isolation, in his fear and despair, for only a certain amount of time. Then God decides enough is enough, breaks through Elijah's brain fog with some sound and fury Elijah can't ignore, and announces that the time has come for two of them to have a little talk. The prophet wraps up his face before stepping outside, as we all do these days, and then comes a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah takes this question literally, and answers it from his hamster wheel of anxiety. "I'm here because I'm scared, God! The world is too big, too broken, too chaotic! I'm here to hide from all that, God!"

Elijah doesn't understand that God's question isn't literal at all, since God already knows exactly how scared Elijah is. Rather, God's question is an existential one, much bigger than the cultural moment in which Elijah finds himself:

*Why did I create you, Elijah? What is your role in this wild, unpredictable world that I love so much?*

*Is it to hide away in a cave, frozen by fear?*

*No, Elijah. You're my prophet, and your place is in my world, transforming it. That is the holy service that gives your life meaning. The only thing that gives it meaning.*

*Now you get out there, Elijah, and know that I am behind you.*

This moment in the Elijah passage also hits close to home. Since March, we've certainly experienced some sound and fury that none of us can ignore. In the city of Richmond alone, we've experienced powerful winds of change that have started fires and toppled statues, one just a few feet from the St. Mark's front door. Out of the noise of these events our own existential question has risen up, one that I've been aware of on my walks, and that maybe some of you have been aware of too:

*Why did I create you, Church? What is your role in this wild, unpredictable world that I love so much?*

*Is it to hide away at home, frozen by fear, mourning the loss of a way of living that allowed injustice to go unchecked?*

*No, Church. You are the body of my beloved son, and your place is in my world, transforming it. Get out there and share the good news of my kingdom. Heal the sick. Feed the hungry. Lift up the poor. While you're at it, get rid of hunger and poverty all together. See my image in all of humanity, and topple any systems that fail to do the same. This is your holy service, Church. This is what gives your life meaning.*

At Pentecost, the early Church found itself hidden away, isolated, scared, in mourning. But then God said the time has come, enough is enough, fear and mourning are no more, and out into the world you go, knowing that I'm behind you. It's the same for the Church today, in the unforgettable year of 2020. Because what was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.

God's push toward holy service is difficult for us in calm times, but even more so here in this pandemic. How do we embrace others when doing so might make them sick? We *must* keep physical safety in mind, but you know... I think we got this. Consider all we've figured out just since March. Zoom church. How to keep our food pantry going. How to support Caritas and the Cooper School. We've our got masks on, we're six feet apart, but we're doing it.

Our bigger challenge will be breaking through our grief over the state of the world. Like Elijah, we can feel it's too big, too broken, that we'll never be able to change it, no matter how much we try. But break through this inertia of grief we must, because God's world needs us.

I want to take us out this morning with a few thoughts on the reading from Matthew, which adds to our picture of the Church in the world.

I love how this passage begins: "Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side." Of course he did, because that's what God does. *You, Church. Move out into the world! That's your job!*

Later, the disciples find themselves in a storm, their boat battered by waves. The world into which the Lord has sent them has literally become chaos.

They are so concerned for their safety, so anxious over their future, that they can't even recognize the Lord when he walks toward them on the water. "It's a ghost!" they say. But the Lord it is, who greets them with the news that we all need to hear:

"Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid."

*I sent you out into this storm, and I'm coming to meet you in the midst of it. I got this chaotic world under control, and I got you, too.*

Peter does what we are all called to do. Overcoming fear, he steps out into that wild, unpredictable world that God loves so much, trusting that the Lord is there. And for one glorious moment, Peter transforms that world. Like the Lord, he walks on water. Like the Lord, he controls chaos rather than chaos controlling him. Yes, Peter doubts, and yes, he falters, but the Lord is there to save him. The point is that Peter took the step.

We have a God who created this gorgeous, complex universe out of nothing. A God who dreamed us into being and blessed us with the gift of holy, transformative service. Imagine what that God can do when a single person has the little bit of faith needed to step out and embrace God's world. Now imagine what that God can do with the entire Church. This is what gives life meaning.

Hear the good news: God is with us in our current isolation, even as God pushes us forward to do the work God has given us to do. And God is out there ahead of us too, coming to meet us in this COVID chaos. We are totally surrounded by God. God is our past, our present, and our future. With this knowledge in our hearts, we can step out into this uncertain world, our fear becoming courage, our anxiety becoming hope, our despair becoming joy.

Amen.

