

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 09, 2026
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

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Attend to Our Inner Voices



One of the highlights of the year for me is the week-long spiritual retreat that I usually take during the summer period. For the past three years, I have chosen a place near Morristown in New Jersey: a Georgian Revival mansion transformed into a retreat center by the Jesuits in the 1930s, surrounded by thirty acres of lawns, gardens, and woodland, with a backyard garden of fountains and shaded benches where I spend long hours reading, meditating, and, I must admit, sometimes placidly dozing off.

To describe what happens during a retreat – or what should happen if undertaken with the right spirit – we have the memorable scene from the first book of Kings where an outraged and exhausted prophet Elijah withdraws in a confused search for answers and inspiration.

Elijah was no novice – he had spent his life trying to fathom God’s ways and teaching his people how to live faithfully. And yet now he is not so sure any more. His heart is in turmoil. We are told that “there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire” (1 Kings 19.11f). Wind, earthquake, and fire are usually interpreted as ‘theophanies’, that is ways in which a powerful divinity manifests itself. They awake fear and awe and make people proud of worshipping a God that has such mastery over nature. There are many instances in the book of Exodus, for example, in which Yahweh does manifest himself in this way.

The time arrives though – for Elijah, for Israel, and for us – to realize that wanting to see God in these phenomena is rather a human projection. Here, in particular, they could be taken as symbols of the passion and the indignation that are raging in the prophet Elijah’s heart. The suggestion is that he would prefer a God that acts against evil forcefully and makes his presence felt in an indubitable way. Twice Elijah claims that he is “zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts” (19:10 and 14). The very zeal for his mission is hindering his ability to recognize who God really is. Wind, fire, and earthquake stand for Elijah’s own passions. They are the way he would have acted if he was God. No surprise he is so confused.

The good thing about Elijah though is that he is prepared to suspend his judgment, to let go of his ways, and to be ready to welcome the unexpected. He remains on that mountain, at the entrance of a cave, long enough to let wind, earthquake, and fire subside – to overcome zeal, passions, indignations, and projections, until his heart can finally perceive God in the “sound of sheer silence” or, according to other translations, in “a gentle whisper” or in “a still small voice” (19:12).

We need to undergo a similar conversion whether through a spiritual retreat or through times of prayer and meditation in the midst of our daily life. We need to learn from Elijah how to attend more discerningly to the many voices and the noise that crowd and sometimes choke our hearts, especially when we have to take important decisions or react to difficult situations.

Jesus invites us to do the same.

In today’s Gospel we see him leaving the crowds behind, sending his disciples on the other side of the lake, and seeking loneliness: “he went up the mountain by himself to pray – and when evening came, he was there alone” (Mt 14:23).

Jesus too struggled with competing voices in his heart like we do. His decision to withdraw on the mountain takes place just after he has accomplished one of his most sensational miracles, the multiplication of bread. Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes that as soon as this miracle happens, Jesus is overtaken by a sense of urgency: “immediately” – we are told – he dismisses the crowds. Instead of capitalizing on the popularity and prestige that the multiplication of bread brings to his cause, he feels the need to withdraw. One of the voices that resonated in his heart after this miracle must have been similar to that which he heard in the desert when Satan told him: “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones turn into bread” (Mt 4:3). Here again is the all too human bias for a divinity that displays irresistible power over history and mastery over nature.

Like Elijah, Jesus knows how to deal with these misleading voices and realign his will on his Father’s will, listen to the Father’s “gentle whisper”, his “still small voice”.

The rest of today’s Gospel is replete with symbols that reiterate the same message.

We are told of a powerful wind that batters the boat. We have the sea, which in the biblical imagination stands for anything that opposes God. Thanks to his retreat on the mountain, Jesus has overcome these expectations about divinity, especially the recurrent bias that wants a god who acts through coercion rather than through persuasion. He has found inner clarity about what his real mission is against the noise of the many desires, passions, fears, and anxieties that troubled his heart as much as they trouble ours – this is how fully he shared our humanity! This is why the treacherous sea cannot swallow him, he can still the wind and walk over the water.

He wins this victory so that he can come to our aid and rescue us. We are in the boat, struggling against the same wind and the same sea, with Jesus' other disciples. He walks over the water, reaches us, and brings us the peace he has conquered for himself. And the moment he joins us in this boat, the wind ceases, the waves are stilled, and we too are safe.

In our life there is no escaping these same biases, projections, fears, and passions that batter us outside and inside. They are part of our human condition. That Jesus himself was not immune from them should give us comfort.

How often, in particular, we discover that we have become anxious about something, that we cannot shake off a generic sense of fear even when we cannot see any threat or danger that might justify it. Whether as a result of biology, of evolution, or of the many stressors of modern life, these negative and misleading feelings, these inner conflicts, keep weighing on our life and we cannot pretend that they are not there or that they cannot affect us. No momentary distractions nor short-term gratifications can numb them.

One antidote against them is the practice of prayer and meditation, and when possible a time of retreat. We start by welcoming wind, earthquake, and fire – by acknowledging our anxieties, fears, frustrations, griefs. We do so prayerfully, meeting each one of these feelings with Jesus' words: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Mt 14:27).

It might take some time for Jesus' reassuring promise to soothe all these voices, to still the wind and quieten the sea. We have to learn from Elijah's patience, persevere in prayer, and keep waiting – until at one point we too are reached by the presence that brings us peace, the Father's "gentle whisper", his "still small voice".
