August 13, 2017

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
1 Kgs 19:9a, 11-13a; Ps 85:9-14; Rom 9:1-5; Matt 14:22-33

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

It is not only the religious-minded person who longs for an experience of the transcendent. Most, if not all people do. They just define transcendence differently. Some search for it in the delight of beauty or various forms of art; others seek it in the warmth of human companionship and intimacy; still others hope to attain it through the use of intoxicating substances. This desire does not necessarily spring from a morbid bitterness toward what some might call the futility of life. Rather, it suggests that all of us have the capacity for something more; something mysterious; something bigger than we are. It is of this that Augustine spoke when he declared: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Both the first reading and the gospel passage for today describe experiences of the transcendent. One occurs in apparent insignificant and often overlooked circumstances (a tiny whispering sound); the other unfolds within a dramatic and threatening situation (a storm at sea). In neither situation was an experience of the transcendent expected. In fact, it almost went unrecognized. What message might these readings have for us today?

In the passage from 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah comes to realize that even the small and insignificant events of life constitute the stage upon which the revelation of God is enacted. It is so easy to be awed by the spectacular and overlook the ordinary. Yet, most lives are made up of the ordinary, and it is there that the “tiny whispering voice” of God will be heard, if we are attuned to it. Many people are unfamiliar with the background of the gospel story. In the ancient Near East, water was often feared because of the devastation wrought by the overflow of unruly lakes and rivers. Thus, it became an apt symbol for chaos. Several creation myths recount how a valiant warrior-god battled the forces of cosmic chaos and emerged victorious. To portray Jesus walking on the chaotic water as a stouthearted conqueror was to cast him in the guise of this creator-god who alone governed the waters.

These two sketches of life experience – the mundane and the chaotic – call to mind ministerial settings facing many of us today; settings that we might overlook because they lack interest, or settings that are so tumultuous that we despair of any solution. In both situations, as ministers we have a responsibility for the people we serve. If we do not help them recognize the transcendent God in their everyday lives, who will? If we become paralyzed by the political, social, or religious conflict in which we are all involved, and we fail to stand with them in trepidation and panic yet trusting in God’s love for us all, who will?

These are not simply fascinating stories, they are ministerial challenges. They remind us that the transcendent God is with us in all situations, we just have to have the insight to recognize how this is the case. Here, the reading from Romans poses a further challenge. In it, Paul
describes the depth of his love for the Jewish people, his kindred according to the flesh. Though this reading says nothing about divine transcendence, it does capture the essence of commitment to the welfare of others. Paul was willing to sacrifice everything. How far are we willing to go in our sacrifice for those entrusted to our care?

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