

Nineteenth Sunday of the Year
August 12, 2012
Year B
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Our Cave On Mount Hebron

If we stop where today's first reading ended, "He got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, in Horeb," we do not know what happens next. However, if you read further, we find out that after walking forty day and nights, Elijah was hiding from, orperhaps searching for God in a cave on the top of Mount Hebron. While there, many frightening natural events took place. But God was not in the ferocious wind, not in the terrible earthquake, not in the all-consuming fire. But after the fire there was a quiet whispering voice, and Elijah hid his face in his cloak forhe knew God was present. The whispering voice commanded Elijah to go forth and do many things. But after doing some of these tasks, anointing Hazael, king of Aram and Jehu, king of Israel, the consequenceswere not what were expected. We witness a bloody mess with deadly conflicts, wars, and other impending disasters. So what does this have to do with us? Or, in Hamlet's words: "*What is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?*" (Actually, Shakespeare borrowed these thoughts from Euripides, but that is another story.)

Well, we have all gotten up this morning; we ate and drank, and are strengthened by that food. Some of us have walked forty, fifty, or more years, day and night, until we reached the top of this sacred hill (our biblical Mount Hebron). And like Elijah, we hide and wait in this cave, this chapel, perhaps this "*School of the Lord's service.*" During some of these journeys, we have lost grandparents and parents, we have lost classmates and friends, we have lost brothers and sisters, we have lost comrades in arms, and we too have seen wars and death close up. This past summer, I watch the TV News on PBS and they showed in silencethe photos of the dead and mostly young soldiers, 21, 25, 27, 19; these are the martyrs of today, perhaps not for the cause of the Church, nonetheless martyrs for other causes.

Overwhelmed by such tragic loss of youth, I was comforted by visiting some war memorials where I came across the words of the Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky: "*Less eager than willing, more dutiful than brave, brave when required, democracy's children, they gave their service far from home, and saw they came as victors, not conquerors, in freedom's name.*" Yes, we have witnessed the best of times and the worst of time, and in that sense, we are the survivors of a great and tediously long sojourn.

Our reading from Ephesians tells us that even in our struggles, we have to put aside all bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and all malice. Instead, we should be "*kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving oneanother as God has forgiven us in Christ.*" We have the strength to do this because Christ handed Himself over to us as the sacrificial offering. And so, we begin again. And today's Gospel tell us that this Christ is "*the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*" If we eat of this food and drink of this blood, we can get up and walk forever in our journey to the Father with and through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yes, we are to be encouraged by the solace offered us in today's New Testament readings. I have been in this cave, this "*School of the Lord's Service,*" since 1964. After these many years, I am just beginning to understand that the reading of Scripture must be a matter of deep prayer, study, and

scholarship. However, this higher scholarship cannot be learned from books alone because the presumption is that wisdom and the subtle mystery of creation require interpretation by a qualified teacher, require the learner to become a true seeker.

As we get older, we learn that in the world, studying and living form an integrated whole, not just a collection of parts. We are one with the Apostles, one with Saint Benedict, Saint Anselm, and the martyrs of the Church; we are one with those killed in violent crimes in our own country and throughout the world; we are one with the young and the dead martyrs of Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are one with the forgotten innocent civilian casualties of war. As our closing hymn reminds us, "God is Love: and He enfoldeth all the world in one embrace."

We can no longer think as individuals, but rather we must think as integral members of a global Church. Rabbi Cooper, who wrote a book called *God is a Verb*, says that: "The flag does not wave in the wind; the wind does not wave the flag. The flag and the wind are interwaving." This is another way to say that individuals and the whole Church, from the beginning to the end of time, are not separate; everyone and everything is interconnected. In our journeys, we no longer can compartmentalize our knowledge or our lives.

Now that I am 72, and I realize that three-fourths of my life, or more, is over and what remains is likely to be inhibited by impairments of some kind. So, I have to stop, catch my breath, and refocus.

Obviously, I do not much like this slowing down. What this means for me is that I had better hurry up and get started on doing the **new things** that the whispering voice of God wants me to do in my limited future.

Yes, there is an inescapable diminishment, a Cross, we all must experience, a Cross in health, in body, and in mind. And so we must prepare ourselves for an end. Or, as Euripides has Hecuba say in his play: "*Wherefore I implore you, powers divine, avert this horror—what shall I do—where shall I end my life?*" These are the very sentiments that Saint Anselm uses in his Prayer Concerning the Cross: "*O wonder, beyond price and beyond compare, how will you comfort and recompense me for my grief? It cannot cease while I am a pilgrim, far from my Lord. What shall I say? What shall I do? Whither shall I go? Where shall I seek him? Where and when shall I find him? Whom shall I ask?*"

It may be easy enough to understand that God can be grasped in and through every life. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." But can God also be found in and through every death? "I am the Alpha and the Omega," the beginning and the end. This is the mystery of a Christian death. The mystic Jesuit philosopher, and anthropologist, Teilhard de Chardin, struggled for most of his life with the concepts of death and the ultimate unity, the interconnectiveness of all things in Christ.

He says that all of us one day or another will come to realize, if we have not already done so, that the process of disorganization or diminishment has installed itself at the very heart of our lives. Sometimes it is the very cells of the body that rebel or become diseased with leukemia or cancer; at other times the very elements of our personality seem to be in conflict with reality or have run amok, and we suffer from great mental anguish. And then, we as a wife, as a husband, as soldier, as a son, as a daughter, as a monk, or as a patient in a nursing home, stand by impotently and watch collapse, rebellion, and inner tyranny; and at times, no friendly influence can really come to our aid.

And if by chance we escape, to a lesser or greater extent, the critical forms of war and other human tragedies and escape these invasions of sickness, we cannot escape old age. Little by little over the years, old age robs us of ourselves and pushes us on towards an end. Yes, time postpones possession even of our bodies, time can tear us away from enjoyment, and finally, time condemns us all to death. But Christ's obedience turns this all upside down, and through Christ, we are made whole again. "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him on the Last Day."

And so, as we celebrate today's liturgy on this 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, we are here once again together in our cave on Mount Tabor with Elijah, perhaps for a few more weeks or fleeting years, waiting and rejoicing. Yes, there is time and there is eternity, and somewhere in between we find ourselves alone and waiting. There is a beginning and there is an end, and somewhere in between we must make a decision to accept the whispering voice of God's will in our lives. And with the power of the Eucharist, as we get older, this decision to accept **God's will** becomes easier; when we were young so many other things used to get in the way.

"Less eager than willing, more dutiful than brave, brave when required, democracy's children, they gave their service far from home, and saw they came as victors, not conquerors, in freedom's name." Pinsky

Scripture:

He got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb. (1 Kings 19:7-4)

Taste and see how good the Lord is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him. (Psalm 34:9)

And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ. (Ephesians 4:30-5:2)

No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him on the last Day. (John 6:41-51)

Concluding Prayer of Saint Anselm at the end of the petitions:

"God of love, whose compassion never fails; we bring before You the troubles and perils of peoples and nations, the sighing of prisoners and captives, the sorrows of the bereaved, the necessities of strangers, the helplessness of the weak and sick, the despondency of the weary, the stumbling of youth, the failing powers of the aged. O Lord, draw near to each; for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son. Amen."