

**"All Our Fears"**  
Homily of August 7, 2005  
by Father Brian Joyce

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Two of the readings, the first one with Elijah and the second one, the gospel with Peter, give us an interesting and curious combination. Elijah finds God not in the noisy earthquake or the powerful wind, but in a small, whispering sound. Actually the Hebrew says, "in the sound of sheer silence." And Peter is thrashing about in the sea, sinking under the waves until Jesus reaches out and pulls him to safety. I don't know, the readings make me think of some of my favorite songs in the fifties and sixties. Elijah makes me think of Simon and Garfunkle and the "Sounds of Silence." And Peter makes me think of Bobby Darren singing, "Splish, Splash, I Was Taking a Bath."

But the readings aren't really about music. In fact, what they're about are fear. They're about fear. Elijah is hiding in a cave, hiding to save his life, and Peter is sinking and screaming for help. In a way, it's very up-to-date because today we have more than enough fear to go around. We all have at least heard, if we weren't there, in the time of the great fear in our nation, the Great Depression, that the President, FDR, got up and said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Today, we are being told officially that you'd better be afraid. We even have official fear labels. We have elevated terror and high terror and severe terror. And we even have color-coded fear, yellow and orange and red.

In my own experience, personally, I'm trying to think when did I have my earliest experience of really being afraid. I must have been three and a half or four. (I hate telling these personal stories when my sister is here! If you had told me you were coming, I would have done something else.) ...My mother had taken me to the corner market and, by today's standards, it was a very tiny market. But she went around one aisle and I went around the other. Then, when I came back, she had disappeared down a third aisle, if they had three, and I was terrified. I thought I was lost and I would never see my mother again, and I experienced fear. Today, parents fear for the safety of their children, surrounded with walls papered with missing children. And adolescents fear whether they are going to be accepted or whether they are going to fit in, or whether they will be a success in life or whether they will make the right career choices. And adults fear about the economy, fear about making ends meet, fear about job loss, about down-sizing, about cutbacks, about loss of health benefits, about loss of pension plans. And the older we get, the more we fear about our health. How many have sat by the phone waiting for the results of an MRI or a biopsy? There is fear of death, our own personal death. Today, the anniversary of Hiroshima reminds us there is fear of death of the planet, that we might put it to death with our own hand. The question I sort of raise with today's gospel is "Where is God in all of this?" In

the dreadful silence waiting for the phone to ring, for the child to be home safe, or for a doctor's report, where is God in all of this? Or, when the storms of life pound us and our hearts start pounding, where is God in all of this?

I remember, I think I was ordained about three years, when a young woman came into see me and she announced, "I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God." My first reaction was to say, "Thank you for sharing, and where do we go with this?" Instead, I said to her, "Why don't you sit down and tell me about the God you don't believe in. Tell me what that God is like." And for half an hour, she told me about the God that she did not believe in. After that, I said, "You know, I think I must be an atheist too, because I don't believe in that God either. The God I believe in, and I think it's the God that Jesus tells us about in story after story and by his own life, the God I believe in is loving and forgiving and extravagantly generous and always near. And the God I believe in, in the short run, is pretty helpless, but in the long run, is steadfast and faithful and strong.

And even when I have to face my own fears, there are two Gods I simply don't believe exist. I simply can't believe in them. One is the version of God who is prying and spying and judging and condemning and always looking over my shoulder, always keeping score, always ready to pounce or to punish. And, you know, Jesus, when he was telling us what God was like said, "God's like a father whose own son betrayed him and that father was never the same again, and got out on the balcony and kept watching and watching so he could be the first one to welcome his son back. That's what our God is like." So, I don't believe in the prying, spying, judging God. There is a second God I do not believe in and I do not think this God exists. It's a magician God who can step in and out of our lives at will, who controls current events and who is clearly the one to blame when things don't go well. I don't believe in that God at all.

The God I believe in is near and caring. The God I believe in challenges us to be our best selves and challenges us again and again to stretch and continue to grow. The God I believe in walks with us when we are weak and stands with us when the storms come, not to change the storm, but to strengthen us or at least to let us know we are not alone. And the God I believe in waits for us lovingly at the end of our days. This God invites us in the sounds of silence to recognition and wonder. What I mean by "recognition and wonder" is to spot again and again there is a presence, there is the spark of God's love and God's spirit near at hand, to recognize it and wonder, to hold dear and treasure what's really precious in life, the awesomeness of the universe and the wonder of our relationships. That God invites us to recognition and wonder which is what most people call "contemplation," and forces us to ask why do we worry about meaningless things and take the precious things in life just for granted. And that God reminds us in the splash splash messiness of our lives, that, in the final analysis, God is there. We are not alone, and we are given enough strength that no pit is so deep, and no fear is so strong that our God is not deeper still and our God is not stronger still.

One pastor tells the story about a neighbor in the parish, not here, who is very negative and very angry and very hostile. Whether he carried a lot of fears that were too much for him or a lot of

hurts that he couldn't let go of, and people just didn't like being around him. They had never, ever seen him smile. For whatever reason, at one point, he began coming to church. And, after about six weeks, he walked up to the pastor after Mass, just beaming from ear to ear and he said, "Hey, you know, this Christianity stuff really works." Now, nothing real dramatic, nothing overwhelming, nothing magic, but somehow being with other believers or people trying to believe, hearing God's word in scripture and reflecting on it, celebrating a sacrament of Christ's presence, somehow it made a big difference. Undramatic, no magic, not sensational, but somehow God was near and God was at work. And that's our message from today's gospel and that is what we celebrate here, that we are called to listen in the silence, to trust in the storms and to know that God is real and God is near. Amen.