

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”    19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)  
I Kings 19: 9, 11-1 Psalm 85 Romans 9: 1-5 Matthew 14: 22-33  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I wonder if Elijah, given a choice, wouldn't have preferred God in the “strong and heavy wind,” the “earthquake” or the “fire?” He and his contemporaries were used to looking for God in such pyrotechnics, the kind that Steven Spielberg or George Lucas so skillfully produce in their films using computer wizardry. Elijah needed manifestation of a powerful God who could stand by and stand up the frightened prophet. And didn't God owe it to Elijah to show a little display of power at this time in the prophet's career? After all, God had gotten him into quite a fix.

God called Elijah and he had responded. But the prophet found himself confronting King Ahab and his pagan queen Jezebel. She was persuading the king and the Israelites to worship the fertility god Baal. God's prophet Elijah entered into a ritual contest between the priests of Baal and himself to see who had the stronger god. Elijah won. God was triumphant, but Jezebel was furious. It doesn't pay to offend the powerful, so Elijah had to flee for his life into the desert. That's where today's story finds him, running for his life and wanting to die.

You would think God would take better care of such faithful servants. Things started well for Elijah, as they did for Peter when he accepted Jesus' invitation to walk on the water. But it is very hard to sustain trust when you are being hunted in the desert or when you are walking on stormy seas. Or, for that matter: through a turbulent period in a marriage; when you can't find work or there's barely enough to raise the children; when your spouse dies and the children are still young; when cancer is taking its time with you or a loved one.

There are other tumultuous moments as well: when you've been speaking out to right a wrong and even your own family takes exception to your stand; when you are trying to do what's right, but are confronted daily by obstacles to your efforts like racism, the debilitating forces of poverty, the enormity of city problems, the intransigence of government or even your own church. Sometimes you feel like you are sinking or can barely stay afloat. And all along you thought you were doing God's work. You ask some obvious questions at times like these. “Where is

God?” “Wasn’t God supposed to help those doing God’s will?” “Whose side is God on anyway?” At times like these, we’d like to join Elijah seeking shelter in a cave far away from the tumult. Or our voice blends with Peter’s, “Lord save me!” (The most eloquent prayers are the shortest and get right to the point----“Help!”)

You can understand then why Elijah might have wanted more than a whisper-proof showing God’s presence and concern. Some days you just want an earthquake to get things moving, a blazing fire to purge the surrounding and pervasive evil or a powerful wind to topple the opposition to needed change. What we most often get it seems, is this Elijah-God, who can’t be manipulated to our expectations; who doesn’t show up at our timing or according to our ordering. So, let’s first join Elijah and “hide” our face before the Most Holy, who is the One True God. We also turn our back on the other Baals who can be bribed by our gifts and impressed by our eloquent prayers. We put our false gods aside and worship the One True God. We are not in charge; we are God’s servants. But let’s also acknowledge this compassionate God who does not come on like “gang busters” to berate the beleaguered Elijah for failure at his post. Instead, to the shaken prophet comes a gentle God whose presence is manifested in a “whispering sound.” We will just have to pay attention to this God who, though difficult to discern at times, is nevertheless present and invested in us.

This is a God who is quite accustomed to whispers and can hear our own prayers said amid tears, our sighs of grief and our groans of disappointments. A soft-spoken God is an appropriate companion when life is tumultuous. Sometimes it is only after a frenetic and distressful period that we can look back at recent events and realize God was here all the time with us. Turns out, though the “whispering sound” of God may be hard to hear, it still is the Almighty God who is doing the whispering and, despite the whispers, God is no less constant and is ever-strong for us. Just because God seems soft-spoken when we would prefer a shout, does not mean God is weak or absent.

The Elijah passage also carries an implication to our modern world. We are, it is a cliché to say, surrounded by noise. There is little escape from it. Even the mystic silence of a forest after a snow fall is now pierced by the shrill of snowmobiles; our lakes are noised-over by power skis and speed boats. It just isn’t healthy. And it’s hard to listen with so much noise around us. To help people achieve some escape from this universal and unrelenting noise pollution, one radio manufacturer

makes ear phones that provide “white sound” to block out ambient noise. We preachers might suggest to our congregation that they (we too!) develop some daily routine of seeking out a quiet place for even a few minutes. There we can practice the Elijah-prayer; trying to be attentive to God who often communicates in a “tiny whispering sound.” We’ll have to be quiet to catch our passing God who is inclined to stop for a while to give the weary servant whatever is needed to continue on the faithful road.

Doesn’t each liturgical celebration give us an Elijah-moment? Though we shouldn’t think of our assembly today as a chance to flee the world and hide out, nevertheless, there is an aspect of comfort and renewal found here. This is a good stopping-off place for God’s servants. We are at Elijah’s cave, the meeting place with God. Here we gather with other wayfarers to pause for a moment and let our spirits catch up with us. Here we turn a yearning ear in God’s direction, knowing that God has something to say to us that is to our benefit. We listen attentively to the proclaimed Word each week, hoping to catch a whisper meant just for us. What we hear reminds us that amid the tumult of our lives, the noise and super-rush of even our ordinary daily activities, God waits to have a word with us. We are assured by our faith, God is not deaf to us, hardened to our predicament or uncommunicative. It’s just that we need to pay close attention, put our own notions about how God should be aside and trust.

After we pause to listen we gather around the altar to proclaim the wonders of our ever faithful God and to receive the perfect food for our journey. Isn’t this eucharistic meal Jesus’ reaching out to us amid the stormy wind and waves, to steady us on our shaky journey through life? Knowing what we must return to after our celebration, the daily challenges to discipleship, we are grateful God has heard even the deepest whispers of our hearts and given us the best food possible for our needs. God may speak in whispers at times, but so does a mother when she is trying to assure her frightened child that she will be there to keep away the shadows of the night.

#### QUOTABLE

(On the preachers’ use of first person illustration)

So many examples exist of questionable first-person pulpit stories that this issue of homiletic integrity must be raised. Most of us have heard stories of preachers who “borrow” an anecdote from others and portray it as their own. And a fair

percentage of the faithful who attend to Christian preaching have heard the same story from different pastoral leaders who delivered it from the pulpit as their own experience. This pulpit plagiarism robs the offending preacher of integrity and also extends its damage to us all. Given the host of issues in which clergy are under attack these days (in many instances quite deservedly), we certainly must abstain from this homiletic promiscuity “henceforth and forever more”! Paul Scott Wilson gives us preachers a blunt, relevant warning: “The preacher must never lie; or claim that something is factual that is fictional; or say that something was a personal experience that was not; or disclose something that was told in confidence”

---- Paul Scott Wilson, THE PRACTICE OF PREACHING, page 265.

## JUSTICE NOTES

Our moral, political, and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us, must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless., the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions of tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care. Consistency means we cannot have it both ways: We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.

---Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, quoted in James Di Giacomo's, DO THE RIGHT THING: A GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN MORALITY, (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991, page 60)

## ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use

“First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

#### **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>  
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA  
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)