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I Kings 19:8-18 and Matt. 14:22-33

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Let Go of the Rope

Do any of you water-ski? This passage from Matthew about Peter starting to sink beneath the waves reminds me of the one time I tried water-skiing, back when I was a high school student. We were at Dale Hollow Lake in Kentucky, and the parent of one of my friends took three of us out in his motor boat. The other two kids already knew how to water-ski and they made it look easy! I was a confident swimmer, comfortable in the water, and strong, so I didn't think I'd have much difficulty skiing.

But, when I was out in the vast lake, holding the end of the long rope and the boat was far away, I couldn't help but notice that the water was cold, dark and very deep. The boat slowly accelerated, and it was much more difficult than I thought, to raise myself from a squatting position on the skis. It was all over pretty quickly. I was grasping the end of the rope, holding on for dear life, as the boat sped across the black lake. I was stretched out on my belly, skimming along, like a piece of bait on a fishing line. I was sometimes gulping swallows of water, as I tried to catch my breath. This was nothing like the control of swimming on my own. How did I get into this mess? I was scared and shaking. The people on the boat were yelling something at me, but it was inaudible over the noise of the water rushing around my ears. Finally, I read their lips. The message they were shouting at me was: "Let go of the rope!"

I realized that I couldn't stop what was happening, I wasn't getting out of the water and back into the boat, until I let go of the rope. And, so finally, I let it go. . .

There are just some things in life that require our letting go. Small things and large things that we fear. Leaving our child at preschool or kindergarten on their first day. Seeing our kid go away to college for the first time. Waiting for results from medical tests. Getting through COVID, only to have a reoccurrence. Worrying about beloved ones in the wake of fire. Wondering about upcoming elections and the prospects of political violence. Sometimes, it feels like the waters are closing in over our heads. And we can't let go of the rope.

Or, like Elijah, from the passage from I Kings, we are hiding out at the mouth of the cave. Elijah has already been through a firestorm and a whirlwind before his adventure on side of Mount Horeb. Having put Jezebel's priests of Baal to shame in a fiery spectacle, Elijah is on the run from Jezebel, who wants him dead. Then comes the story from today's reading— fire, wind, earthquake, lightning, and smoke—until finally: utter calm and sheer silence. And in that silence is the very presence of God.

I have not been able to stop looking at the images of devastation from Maui's wildfire. It's difficult to take in, the scope of tragedy and damage. And the news of John Core's sudden death is a tragic loss. Our hearts ache for Christine and loved ones.

We've weathered losses, storms, floods, and fires, and are wondering just what comes next.

We live in a world where dangers lurk, and where life will always bring events that cause us to fear and worry. But our scriptures today show us that these are exactly the moments when we see that our faith and hope are nothing compared to the faithfulness of God. Jesus reaches out his hands, grabs our arms as we sink into the deep, and pulls us into his embrace.

.. As we are learning to live with a global pandemic, in a postmodern world, and in a turbulent, and transitional time – we are invited let go of the rope, and to listen to God in the silence.

Fear will keep us from hearing what God is whispering to us. Today, I want us to contemplate how we can let go of the rope. How can we rest in the silence, regain ourselves and feel God's presence with us?

I confess that for most of my adult life, I've struggled with bouts of insomnia. Just a couple of nights ago, my mind was full concerns, for the people of Maui, my two sons, the warming planet, the congregation, my list of things to be done. . .

Writer Anne Morrow Lindbergh coined a German term that expresses the feelings that come with that kind of fear and worry. The word is *Zerrissenheit*: "torn-to-pieces-hood". There are so many factors in our lives that make it challenging for us to find that peaceful silence that gives calm assurance of God's love. We are torn apart in our busyness, torn apart in our polarization, torn apart in our connection to one another and to God. The bombardment of outside stimuli depletes our energy, and can make us forget ourselves and our true nature, made in the image of God. Carrying our smartphones with us all the time intensifies the turmoil. How do we hear God through all that noise?

Cultivating silence in our lives takes practice, like any other discipline. Like practicing a musical instrument, a martial art or sport, it gets better and better with daily practice. I have a few suggestions on ways that we can cultivate a stillness that allows repair of our *zerrissenheit*, our torn- to- pieces- hood:

- Schedule a regular time for quiet, and stillness—a solitary walk, swim, meditation or prayer time
- Reserve time to write in a journal, or poetry or letter-writing
- Stare out the window without thinking
- Garden mindfully
- Make time to really see and draw a picture
- Practice music, or quilt
- Arrange flowers
- Pitch a baseball or shoot hoops
- Be outdoors

When we silence our phones, and make space for quiet in our lives, we can repair our torn apartness. God's love is better able then to penetrate our lives and bring us back together in relationship with one another, and the planet. I am closing with words by farmer-poet Wendell Berry, who is wise about silence and connection.

“When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's life may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with fore-thought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Friends, we are all invited: Let go of the rope. . .