

August 13, Ordinary 19A (1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33)

## **Both Elijah and Peter face a stark reality: fear.**

by [Maria Mallory White](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

War rages around us, and all too often within us. In the texts before us this week, we see both: major battles between people and fights raging inside one person. But they share a central issue: fear.

In 1 Kings, there is a war raging for the souls and the spiritual allegiance of God's chosen people. The nation has split into two, and the people's affection for Yahweh has turned to disobedience, their fidelity to idolatry. There is a war raging for the very souls of God's people.

Then Elijah shows up. First Kings tells of the mighty acts of this prophetic warrior. A God-sent, miracle-working, one-man wrecking crew, Elijah takes on King Ahab's Baal-worshiping wife, Jezebel, and wipes out no fewer than 450 of her favored prophets. In response, Jezebel sends Elijah a special hand-delivered death threat.

And what does Elijah do? Full of fear, he runs away.

First in verse 10 and later in verse 14, Elijah explains that he is running scared because it looks to him like all is lost. As faithful and fierce a weapon for the Lord as he has been, the Israelites have not budged in their sins. Elijah feels he has been no more effective a prophet than those who came before him, who died trying to make a difference for the Lord. Many of us today know what that's like: We are working hard for the Lord, but often we do not see the returns.

Despite all Elijah's work, the people haven't stopped worshiping idols. Despite all his praying, they haven't returned to the covenant. Despite his wonder working, they haven't remembered who or whose they are. Despite all they've seen that the Lord has done through Elijah, the people still have not changed their ways. And full of fear, Elijah runs. He heads to Mount Horeb to give up, to turn in his prophet's license and retire in disgust and defeat.

In the Matthew text, Peter has his own bout with fear. By this point in the Gospel, Peter has witnessed and even shared in Jesus' power. Peter and the other disciples just participated in the miraculous feeding of 5,000 men—and untallied women and children—with a little bit of fish and unleavened bread, basically a lunch portion of fish tacos. The blessed fish and bread were placed in the disciples' hands, and the multiplication was manifest as they served the crowd. What's more, Peter challenged Jesus to confirm his identity and thus was first to recognize Jesus walking on the water. Then he joined Jesus for his very own stroll on the waves.

Still, despite all this, the dynamic current of the wonder-working power of Jesus is short-circuited. Peter gives in to fear. Both Elijah and Peter have to face a stark reality: fear can sideline even the most accomplished of God's great servants.

Matthew shows us how Peter deals with this fright. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" I can hear a gospel favorite—"in my spiritually baptized imagination," as I heard preachers say when I was growing up—give lyrical testimony to Peter's plight:

Hear my cry, hear my call,  
Hold my hand lest I fall.  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

I'm so glad Peter shows me I don't have to try to be a super saint. There may be select moments when I am so focused on the Lord that I am floating above the world's natural order. But Peter's wave-walking escapade shows me that these moments will be fleeting. I still need a savior, after all. One moment I'm in supernatural sync with my savior, and the next I'm drowning in doubt. Still, Jesus never leaves me. Jesus never forsakes me.

The psalmist's words confirm God's covenant promises, the grounding of the believers' peace: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace to His people, to His faithful, to those who turn to Him in their hearts. My salvation is secure because of His word."

This truth quiets the storms in my life. Elijah witnesses a great wind and earthquake and fire—all of which he has associated with the movement of God, but none of which contain God or God's salvific activity. Elijah teaches all of us who will sometimes fall victim to fear that our God's providential plan transcends earthbound signs.

Ultimately, as Christians our fear is defeated through faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul writes in our reading from Romans, quoting Isaiah, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” But since fear is a persistent foe, we have to remember to return to our faith. Another gospel favorite reminds me to fight fear with my faith in my Savior: “If the storms don’t cease / And if the wind keeps blowing, / My soul has been anchored in the Lord.”