Lord over the chaos

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

The Old Testament text for today comes right after the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal. In that contest the Lord had sent fire from heaven that had consumed not only the meat from the sacrifice, but also the altar, that is, the wood and the stones and even the water. It was a great victory, and yet nothing happened. Elijah was depressed. In the text for today the story continues.

So, Elijah went off into the desert. He said: "I might as well die, I'm the only one left." The Lord said to him: "Go up on the mount."

The text says that first there came a wind that was so strong that it broke the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake that also broke the rocks, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then there was fire, and then there was a still small voice.

"A still small voice." People remember this from Scripture. They remember there's the still small voice, and Elijah listened. We think of this still small voice as being the deepest feeling, the innermost thoughts, or even the conscience. But this is an error in translation. It came from the King James Version and is continued here in the RSV.

But when you look at the Hebrew, it says "a sound of gentle stillness." In other words, silence.

Ah, "the sound of silence." We think of Simon and Garfunkle. What is silence?

Musicians know a lot more about silence than we do because in classical music you have the pause, the rest, and silence is a part of the musical sphere that we hear.

Back in the 1950's the avantgarde composer John Cage wrote a piece called 4'33". It was 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence in three parts. First, 30 seconds, then 143 seconds, then 100 seconds. At the debut of this piece, the pianist signaled the parts by opening and closing the lid of the piano.

After the performance, Cage said that during the first movement there really wasn't silence because you could hear the wind outside. During the second movement, raindrops began pattering on the roof. And during the third movement, people themselves made all kinds of sounds as they began to talk and walk out.

Cage's point was that there is really no such thing as silence. There is always something to hear, something to see.

Another musician about the same time, an Italian, wrote a symphony honoring Antarctica, a place of silence, but also a place of the sounds of ice and wind, whales and penguins. So, not really a place of silence either.

Where is there silence? Perhaps in outer space? Is there real silence out there?

Of course, silence can be terrifying, too. Simon and Garfunkle wrote of a silence that grows like a cancer within us.

At the end of Hamlet, Hamlet says as he dies: "The rest is silence."

We are all caught by the question of silence.

People have said that if that "still small voice" found in 1 Kings 19:12 is properly translated as the sound of silence, then what we should do is meditate in silence. In fact, there's a widespread spiritualty emphasis that is put on people, saying: "Now the important thing is to be silent, and if you do this, then you will truly hear God."

The problem, of course, is that God is not found in silence.

The text says that after God had caught Elijah's attention, then he spoke to him. God is not playing games with us. God speaks. What did he say to Elijah? Go and make Hazael king of Syria and Jehu king of Israel, and Elisha your successor, and everybody who flees is to be slaughtered, and there are still 7,000 who have not bowed to Baal.

God is not found in nature, not even in nature when we talk about silence as our deepest feelings, conscience, or thoughts.

Rather, God is found through his word. That brings us to the gospel text for today in which Jesus and Peter both walk on water. How many of you have walked on water recently? After all, if Peter did, why not you and me?

About this text, some have said that there must have been a sand bar underneath so they just appeared to walk on water. But no. These disciples, these fishermen knew about such things. They also knew about the problem of ghosts and apparitions.

What did they do? They worshipped him, saying: "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33). He is Lord of nature. Lord of the storm and the water.

Traditionally the boat is understood to be the church, and the main body of the church is called the nave because the Latin word for ship is *navis*.

But the water is the chaos, and that's basic to the way the Bible understands water. It's death, chaos. He who is Lord of the chaos and the water is also Lord of death.

It's important for us to realize that even then on the water the disciples got it wrong because although the Lord sustains the universe and holds it in the palm of his hand, they still didn't get what was coming.

Two chapters later, in Matthew 16, again comes the confession as in our text, this time by Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says: "I have to go and suffer and die on the cross and after three days be raised," and Peter answers: "Oh, no. This is not going to happen." And Jesus says to him (Matthew 16:23): "Get behind me, Satan! You're a hindrance to me, a stumbling block, a scandal."

That's then the problem. We think we will find God elsewhere. In nature, or in ourselves, or in something we can manage.

Of course, then the scandal, the offense is the same one we hear about in 1 Corinthians 1:23: "The Jews seek signs (miracles) the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, who is a stumbling block, a scandal – that's the word that is used – to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The point is that as the Lord of the universe, he is Lord in a way that is not ours to manipulate.

Why had he gone out on the water with his disciples, dismissing the crowd? He had to get them out of there because they had just had the feeding of the five thousand. And what did the 5,000 want to do? They wanted to keep Jesus there so he could keep producing food every day.

Their problem is our problem, too. As soon as we see this good thing, we think: How can we manipulate it? How can we make use of it?

The point of the texts in both the Old and New Testaments is: This one is Lord of nature and not dependent on anything in nature, but in a different way, so that it is not something that we can manipulate, but something in which he gives us all good things.

As we look forward to this coming week, we remember that he is Lord over all the chaos, whatever that is, whatever the troubles are, even death itself, because he has conquered death as well. He is Lord. Amen