

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**P**lace a bowl of fresh water on a table. Light a candle beside it. Pass the bowl of water around the circle. Each person stirs the waters and identifies a wave or cross current they feel stirring the waters in the Church or world today. Pray together.

**LEADER 1:** We live in the embrace of God.

**ALL:** We live in love unfolding.

**LEADER 2:** We live in history, the certainty of the past.

**ALL:** We live in the promise of Jesus, who goes ahead of us.

**LEADER 3:** We live the new life of baptism.

**ALL:** We come to listen to God's word and the silence within us.

**T**wo spiritual heroes whom scripture remembers for their faith and prophetic actions walk with doubt and despair in Sunday's readings. Both the apostle Peter and the prophet Elijah live and lead in unsettled times and experience questions we are asking today. Where is God in this mess? Where is Jesus in this cross wind?

Professor Chet Raymo grew up Catholic but became what he calls a "scientific agnostic," learning to think for himself

# SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

as he studied for a doctorate in physics at Notre Dame. An agnostic doesn't deny the possibility of God but receives our traditions about God with skepticism. Raymo is wary of a God made too much in our own image.

In his book *When God Is Gone Everything Is Holy*, Raymo writes that learning should bring us to ignorance, to recognize what we don't know—to

what another writer calls the "mystery and manure" of life.

Catholic mystics call this the negative way, recognizing God is beyond all knowing. Raymo keeps science and religious experience in dialogue.

"A hundred years ago, who could have imagined the dervish dance of the DNA or the ripples in the energy of the big bang that gave rise to galaxies. Who today can imagine what we will know a hundred years from now?" Raymo asks. Drawing on the Gerard Manley Hopkins



poem "God's Grandeur," he continues, "The world is shot through with a grandeur that now and again flames out 'like shining from shook foil.' ...I wait. Alert. Always. For the shining" (21).

Peter and Elijah like Raymo call us to pay attention to mystery in our lives. We may find God when we are in over our heads or getting no answers.

● **With what questions about God or about Jesus do you live?**

# GOSPEL

## His disciples find Jesus with them.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. Early in the morning Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified.

**DISCIPLES:** It is a ghost!

**NARRATOR:** They cried out in fear. Immediately Jesus spoke to them.

**JESUS:** Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.

**PETER:** Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.



**JESUS:** Come.

**NARRATOR:** Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened. Beginning to sink, he cried out.

**PETER:** Lord, save me!

**NARRATOR:** Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

**JESUS:** You of little faith, why did you doubt?

**NARRATOR:** When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Those in the boat worshiped him.

**DISCIPLES:** Truly you are the Son of God.

Matthew 14.22-33

80s are not always sure which way is the gospel way in their unsettled, transitional time. They move from one side to the other, falter and recover, as they gradually claim their mission to the nations and rely on their faith in Jesus and in themselves and each other.

Even when they seem sure of themselves, the way of Jesus and the way ahead of them leading through death to resurrection are not clear and fail safe. They are a church struggling to be born, whose day has not yet fully dawned.

- When has making your way forward involved conflict?
- What waves of uncertainty have you faced in making your way to God and deeper faith?
- When has a powerful idea or experience taken you off a course that was more familiar and brought you deep into controversy?

## The Church's mission is to all people.

As the gospel story begins, Jesus insists that the disciples go ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He goes up the mountain to pray and catches up with the disciples very early the next morning by walking toward them on the water.

The disciples are at sea in a boat. The boat which holds

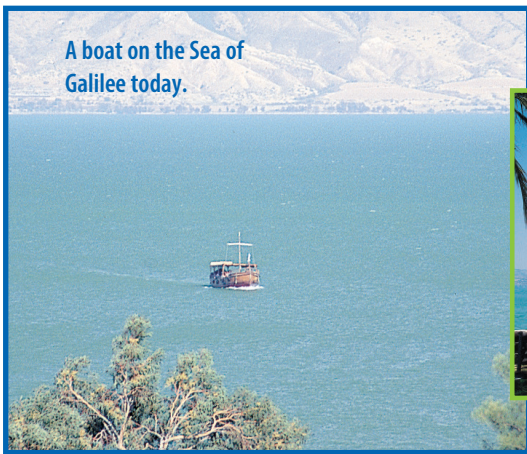
them and keeps them afloat symbolizes the church. Strong head winds toss the boat on dangerous waves. This is Matthew's image of strongly opposing views upsetting and threatening the community.

The risen Jesus is not with Matthew's community in the same way the historical Jesus was. The Christians of the A.D.

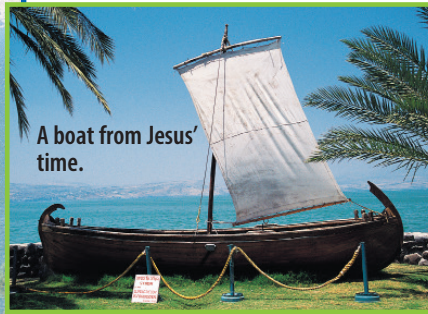
The exodus story echoes in this sea-crossing gospel.

Like Moses Jesus goes apart on a mountain to pray. Like their ancestors escaping slavery, Jesus' disciples face an seemingly impassible sea.

Matthew pictures Peter in a community struggling between the experience of having Jesus among them in the flesh and the promise of his risen presence. How



A boat on the Sea of Galilee today.



A boat from Jesus' time.

does Jesus continue with this community? Is he a ghost, a memory, a real presence?

Peter puts Jesus to a test. He requests a miracle. “If this is really you, command me to come to you on the water.” This *if* statement repeats the bystanders’ taunts to Jesus on the cross—“If you are the messiah, save yourself.”

Jesus quickly says, “Come.” This scene invites faith. It suggests the journeys of early Christians to baptism as well as the journey of Jesus’ disciples to faith in his risen presence. An early Christian baptistry at Dura-Europa in Syria has this scene painted on its wall above a baptismal pool (A.D. 250).

Stepping into the water and the future requires faith for Peter and for all who follow. Boldly Peter steps out of the boat, outside the comfortable circle of disciples and friends. Immediately strong head winds and great waves take his

attention off Jesus and fill him with fear and terror.

As he falters, Peter cries out to Jesus. Like the God of their ancestors, Jesus hears Peter’s cry and stretches out his arm to support Peter and meet him. Peter finds Jesus’ presence with him in faltering and crying out.

- Where are you in over your head and faltering?
- What are you crying out about?

**C**rossing to the other side of the lake is Matthew’s way of saying Jesus and later his disciples are taking the gospel beyond their community of mostly Jewish Christians. The eastern side of the lake is Gentile territory.

In its mission of spreading the gospel, the community for whom Matthew writes experiences conflicts. First of all, faith in Jesus brings Jewish Christians into conflict with family members who don’t follow Jesus.

Secondly, Gentile believers raise questions for Matthew’s community about whether to require these converts to

observe Jewish sabbath, ritual purity, and dietary laws and customs as Jews do. Such questions heighten tensions among community leaders and members.

**T**he Church today faces headwinds and cross currents on a global scale. Just as God became human in Jesus in the incarnation, Jesus’ message has become inculturated in diverse peoples around the globe. What will the Church be like as more Catholics live in Nigeria or Brazil than in Europe and America?

The Second Vatican Council expressed respect for other religions. Interfaith dialogues among neighbors and colleagues as well as among religious leaders and theologians challenge us to find ways to work together to bring God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Pope Francis brings to Rome his experience from Argentina. He speaks from a new social location and from being involved with people in the barrios of Latin American cities. Pope Francis wants “a Church which is poor and for the poor, who have much to teach us. ...We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called

**DO SOMETHING**

**CHARITY** **JUSTICE**

- Introduce yourself to a new neighbor, especially one who is different from you in race or religion.

to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their cause, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*Joy of the Gospel*, #198).

● **What challenges face the world-embracing Church that is struggling to be born today?**



## Elijah hears God in sheer silence.

**T**he prophet Elijah must flee for his life after he proves that Israel’s God is God in his contest with Queen Jezebel’s prophets, who worship the Canaanite god Baal. Fed by an angel, Elijah flees south to the mountain of God, where 400 years earlier Moses and the people made the covenant and where Elijah now finds shelter in a cave.

Defending God and troubling the king have worn the prophet out. At Horeb Elijah crawls into a cave, its darkness and the despair also within him. Where is God?

Sunday’s reading begins with God calling Elijah out of the cave to stand on the mountain. God is not present in the old ways—not in the storm and fire that awed Moses and the people, not in wind, fire, and quaking earth like the

Canaanite god, who rides the storm clouds.

Elijah hears God in a new way—in the sheer silence that follows the storm. God speaks deep within the interior silence of his consciousness.

In the sound of silence the voice of the God of hosts sends Elijah back to the very same fearful and violent place from which he has come. God charges him to anoint kings for Israel and rival neighbor Aram and to anoint a prophet to succeed him. In despairing of the old images of God, Elijah encounters God’s voice within, calling him to renew his mission in the political crosswinds of his time.

### God speaks to Elijah.

**At Horeb, the mount of God, Elijah came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”**

**Now there was a wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.**

**When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.**

1 Kings 19.9,11-13

● **Where do you experience the sound of sheer silence? What call do you hear in the sound?**

● **What have solitude and silence taught you?**

## PRAY

Take a few moments to consider one way in which you hear God calling you to move or act. Then pass the bowl of water around the circle with each person blessing him- or herself with water and making a personal commitment to action.



Sing together, “We Are Called” (*Gather*, #301), or pray its words together in renewed commitment:

*We are called  
to act with justice,  
we are called  
to love tenderly;  
we are called  
to serve one another,  
to walk humbly with God.*

*Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.*



**Find daily prayer at  
[goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com)**