"***From the Cave to the Waves: Listening for God", A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, August 9, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY***

[God] said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great 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 of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-14)

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. [30]But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" [31]Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt 14:29-32)

Our biblical selections today offer up some images that are all too real in this summer of 2026, as wildfires ravage towns in the Pacific Northwest, Canada and all over Europe, including even formerly wet and rainy Scotland and Southeast England, and Venezuela endured a severe earthquake just a few weeks back. Wind, rain, fire, earthquake, natural disasters that upend lives and cause chaos, to complement the chaos that continues to reign in world and national political circles are the coin of the realm these days. And St. Mark's continues a period of intentional reflection on who we are and where we are going with the launch of the Holy Cow survey this week which will gather important data for us as we continue our discernment journey.

As we continue through this season of discernment—surveys, focus groups, shared reflection—we are engaging in a profoundly Benedictine spiritual practice. We are choosing to listen for God in the silence beneath the noise, and in a community that rows together through the storm of transition. In the Benedictine tradition, discernment begins with a single, radical act: **listening**. This kind of listening is slow. It is patient. It is communal. It is grounded in humility and shaped by the conviction that God speaks not only through scripture and prayer, but through the gathered community itself. And Benedict is clear: God's guidance rarely arrives in the dramatic, the spectacular, the thunderous. It comes through the quiet voices, the unexpected voices, the voices we might overlook. It comes through silence. It comes in community.

Today's readings give us two companions for this journey: The prophet Elijah, who hears God in sheer silence, and Peter, who discovers God in the steadying presence of community in the midst of a raging storm. Together they teach us how to listen, how to trust, and how to discern.

We begin today with the prophet Elijah—exhausted, frightened, spiritually depressed. He has fled into the wilderness after killing the prophets of Baal, and after being threatened with death by Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. He collapses into an exhausted sleep after begging God to let him die. An angel visits him several times offering him food and water which he consumes before his forty-day journey to Horeb, the mount of God. Convinced he is alone, convinced that all is lost, he hides in a cave, waiting for God to speak. And the drama comes. A wind so strong it splits

mountains. An earthquake that shakes the ground beneath him. A fire that blazes with terrifying force. But, he learns, God is not in the wind. God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire. God is in the *sheer silence* that comes after the pyrotechnics.

Elijah learns that God's presence is not always found in spectacle. God's guidance is not always loud. Sometimes the voice of God is the quiet that remains when everything else stops. This is the first movement of discernment: *listening in the silence*. Listening without demanding signs. Listening without insisting that God speak dramatically. Listening with the ear of the heart.

And this is precisely the moment St. Mark's is in now. As you take the survey, as you later gather in focus groups, as you reflect on who you are and who you are becoming, you are practicing Elijah's kind of listening—patient, humble, open-ended, receptive. You are choosing to trust that God speaks through silence, through one another, through the slow work of communal wisdom.

And then we turn to Peter, the rock on whom Jesus said his church would be built. He is the consummate disciple - eagerly listening to Jesus, following him around, engaging him in conversation when he teaches and preaches, asking questions, wise enough to confess him as the Christ, later becoming a noted preacher and teacher in his own right. Peter is a very flawed human, promising fidelity to Jesus one minute and then denying Jesus three times when it becomes dangerous to be associated with him. In today's story, he is arrogant and cocky enough to put Jesus to the test at a moment of extreme tension and fear.

We enter the story just after Jesus has pulled off a miracle, feeding five thousand people with a mere five loaves and two fish much to the astonishment of his hapless disciples. He tells his disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake, while he dismisses the crowds and spends some time in prayer. Before long the boat gets battered by the wind and waves and the disciples are working hard to keep going through the storm and keep the boat afloat. They are out there a long time - it is evening when the boat is being battered by the waves and it is early the next morning when Jesus walks out to them on the water. All night these faithful disciples keep to their oars, rowing away, trying to get to land, doing as they must under difficult circumstances.

Now, enter Jesus walking across the water toward tired and aching disciples who have been working hard all night long to keep their boat afloat in a storm. Peter, in his inimitable way, not content to trust that Jesus is who he says he is, challenges Jesus - "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." While many interpreters of this story charachterize it as a story about Peter not having "enough faith" to keep walking on the water, about how his doubt once he got out there did him in and he'd have been fine if he'd just had "enough faith", I see the doubt part of this story at play right here. It's not only when he's out on the water that Peter doubts - it is while he is still in the boat and Jesus has said to him, "It is I." Once he's out on the water, he begins to doubt himself and that's when he sinks. But while he's in the boat, it's Jesus he doubts and, in his arrogance and cockiness, he chooses to put Jesus to the test. It doesn't go well for him. Thankfully, Jesus saves him from himself when he starts to sink.

Peter learned an important lesson in that moment. He learned that religious faith and the spiritual life is not a solo journey. The disciples in the boat are a community of faithful people

committed to a common goal. They are working hard, doing what they are trained to do, staying faithful to the task before them and weathering a brutal battering by sea and wind and they are doing it together. As Jesus approaches, they are at first frightened because they don't immediately recognize him, given all the other drama that is surrounding them in that moment. When he calls out to them "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid" they recognize him. When Peter jumps out of the boat and quickly loses his nerve and starts to sink, Jesus is there to pull him to safety. They both return to the boat, back to the community of disciples who are still working hard at managing the storm and keeping the boat afloat.

St. Mark's is engaged in a process that feels uncertain, a little scary, but also exciting, as we look carefully at who we are as a faith community now, what gifts we bring and how we are being called to offer them to a hurting, chaotic world. In our own discernment as a parish, we may be tempted to want dramatic clarity—quick answers, obvious signs, a thunderclap of direction. But God often speaks in quieter ways: in the slow work of listening to one another, in the gentle tug of shared wisdom, in the silence that makes room for the Spirit. Right now, our call is not to walk on water. Our call is to be like the eleven who stayed at the oars—steady, faithful, listening, rowing together, continuing to do the good work St. Mark's has always done. Our call to is remember who we are as St. Mark's and why it matters that we continue to grow in faith for years to come.

We may not receive a dramatic theophany. We may not hear God in thunder or earthquake or fire. But we *will* hear God in the silence we create together. We *will* hear God in the voices of one another. We *will* hear God in the slow, patient work of communal discernment. We *will* encounter God at the Eucharistic feast every week. We *will* encounter God as we continue important ministries of St. Mark's. Benedictine spirituality is founded on the disciplines of stability, obedience and conversion of life all of which are integral to St. Mark's journey right now:

- **Stability**: staying present to the community and active in it rather than running from discomfort or waiting for someone else to change things
- **Obedience**: listening deeply, not reactively to the wisdom of the community
- **Conversion of life**: being willing to be changed by what is heard during this time of discernment

This is how we will reconnect with who we are and have always been. This is how we will discover where God is calling us next. This is how God will reveal to us the priest who will walk with us into the future we are already creating for this community.

Today, as we gather at the table, we will encounter Christ not in spectacle but in presence. Not in dramatic signs but in the holy mystery of bread and wine. Not in solitary heroism or acts of bravado, but in shared communion. This is our theophany. This is our boat. This is our silence. This is our community. May we listen deeply. May we row faithfully. May we trust the quiet. May we trust one another. And may we discover—again and again—that Christ comes to us in Elijah's cave and in the storm-tossed boat atop the waves, in silence and in the storm, calling us to take heart, to not be afraid, and to trust that God is with us in this very moment.

Amen.