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Last summer the children were watching a program about the mind and religious experiences. During one segment of the show, the producers profiled a psychologist who used art to gain insight into psychology of religion. This doctor gathered a group of around 30 participants of all ages (children aged 5 to seniors), different cultures, genders, sexual orientations, different religions and no religion at all. Each person was given a painting station with a blank canvas and the researcher asked each person to paint the same thing. The painting assignment was to paint God. The results were varied and fascinating because the similarities between paintings were not based on a.) being religious, or b.) one's religious affiliation, or one's culture, or gender, or orientation. Rather age (and sometimes life experience) was a more significant factor in the types of paintings of God that participants produced. Younger children were more likely to depict God as a parental or grandparental figure, usually male, whom they described as kind, patient, all-knowing, wise, but also judging, strict, and in charge. Around the age 12, however, the paintings began to shift into much more abstract, or even metaphorical depictions of God. One painting was simply pulsating colours; another was of a colourful, snug house (signifying safety and comfort), another was a heart, filled with colours; still another was yellows and blues. Only one person was unable to paint anything at all, and simply drew a question mark. The researcher explained that the results were very consistent general patterns that he had observed regarding age and the level of abstraction in a depiction of God (i.e. the younger a person was, the more anthropomorphic; the older a person was, the more amorphous and abstract). He added a detail that I found very intriguing, which was that if a person of faith did not, around the onset of adolescence shift from an anthropomorphic to an amorphous or symbolic depiction of God, he or she would be less likely to remain a believer going into adulthood. In other words, an abstract attempt to depict God was a sign of a faith that had made the leap from God as parental authoritarian monarch, to God as a transcendent, ever-present reality.



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In the First Reading from Kings, the prophet Elijah is on Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai). He has come from Mt. Carmel in northern Israel, having fled for his life after defeating King Ahab's prophets of Baal. Baal, who was often depicted with a lightning bolt, was the Canaanite god of the storm, and as the kingdom was suffering through a crippling drought, Baal's intercession was urgently needed. In a cinematic show-down between the prophets of Baal and Elijah, the people construct a pyre, slaughter two bulls (one for each competitor), and place the pieces of the animal on the pyre. Elijah says, "Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." (1 Kings 19:24). To make it even more challenging, Elijah orders that his pyre be soaked in water. The prophets of Baal are unable to elicit even a spark from Baal. Elijah's prayer to the Lord, on the other hand, results in a fiery inferno from heaven, which is so hot that everything: the meat, the wood, even the stones and dust are consumed. Elijah clearly establishes that "the Lord is indeed God" (1 Kings 19:39), and that Baal is inconsequential.

Sending fire down from heaven is pretty dramatic. Having recently watched *The Avengers* with the kids, I can attest that it is a timeless method of demonstrating power, and for the God of Israel to do this clearly illustrates that YHWH is more powerful than Baal and his scepter of lightning. Yet, if we think about it, it's not really enough to have YHWH as simply a competitor of Baal, someone who is just better at Baal's game than he is. The author of Kings goes a step further to make it clear that God is not just one super-powerful god among many, like an Avengers team member, but rather, the only god, in a unique, one-spot-only category.

So it is that Elijah finds himself journeying from Mt. Carmel to Mt. Horeb, the same place in which Moses had received the Torah some 400 years earlier. Now, when Moses went up the mountain, Sinai was wreathed in smoke and cloud, the noise of the trumpets and the thunder was so loud that the people there trembled and the mountain shook.



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Exodus 19:19 says that Moses would speak to God, and God would answer Moses in thunder, and so even the account of the giving of the Torah describes God in Baal-like terms. Thus, Elijah's experience is an utter shock: how could God not be in the wind that was splitting rocks, or the earthquake, or the fire? Wasn't that the norm? And what on earth is the "sound of sheer silence" (in Hebrew it is more like "small, calm voice")? When Elijah hears this small voice, he goes to the entrance of the cave, wrapping his face in his mantle. Elijah perceives that the Lord is present to him in a way that is the antithesis of the super-hero model of divinity: God can be fully God without the special effects, and in the most unexpected way. Elijah, whose name means "My God is Yah", is able to move from the standard expectation of religious experience into something much more deeply personal, yet thrillingly transcendent.

The Gospel takes place, not on a mountain, but out on the water, and, as we heard, it is immediately after Jesus fed "the crowd with the five loaves and two fish." Earlier, Jesus had "withdrawn" in a boat after hearing of John the Baptist's execution. This time, Jesus sends his disciples out on a boat, and once again he retreats by himself to pray. Last week fr. Darren compellingly suggested that Jesus' withdrawal and subsequent feeding of the multitude had layers of political subversion, as Jesus revealed himself as the opposite of Herod, whose banquets resulted in death. In light of both Darren's interpretation and today's first reading, I will continue the pattern of the inversion of expectations and suggest that the gospel teaches an important message about the purpose of great theophanic signs. That is, in the life of faith, what is the balance between needing incredible signs to nourish belief and the quiet confidence that sustains a life of prayer and relationship with God?

Out on the water, the boat the disciples are in soon becomes engulfed by choppy water. To borrow a phrase from Darren, this episode is, like the feeding of the multitude, an important memory in the church, as it is found in three gospels, Mark, Matthew, and John. It would be a delight to delve into a close comparison of each account, but for now let me observe only that all three accounts mention a wind that



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has made seafaring difficult, and that Jesus walks out on the water and offers a word of comfort expressed in self-revelation: “It is I, be not afraid” . It is only in Matthew’s gospel that Peter challenges Jesus after he speaks...an act of chutzpah that is both hilarious and cringe-worthy.

Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water’ (Matt 14:28). In a conversation earlier this week, my dad observed that Peter is a pretty great guy, not always reliable, but a gregarious, happy go lucky sort that enjoyed company and friends. Perhaps he was wowed and zowed by the feeding of the multitude and had a “let’s do it again!” attitude. If Jesus could walk on water, that’s impressive – but if he could make Peter also walk on water, that is amazing! What is curious is that Peter’s challenge links Jesus’ identity to its successful completion, “if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” What Peter does not realize, is that his question reveals as much about who he is, as it does about who Jesus is.

The unfolding of the scene is well-known: Peter gets out of the boat, starts across the water, but soon begins to sink. I’ve always had the impression that he sinks because his concentration is broken...rather like falling off of a tightrope, or the internet connection being patchy...if only he had concentrated harder on Jesus! But I wonder if there is something deeper here (no pun intended). Peter’s trouble begins when he “noticed the strong wind”. This struck me as odd because the wind had been blowing the whole time (Matt 14:24), and it was the entire cause of their predicament. How could Peter only be noticing it now? Once he notices it, he “becomes frightened”, and it is only then that he begins to sink, after his fear sets in. Earlier, in verse 27, Jesus had linked his identity with not being afraid, “It is I, be not afraid”, and I think this, coupled with the first reading, helps us to understand Peter’s reaction here. Peter notices the wind and becomes afraid and his fear is the reverse of Jesus’ self-disclosure. Peter had thought that his own walking on water would establish Jesus’ identity, only to learn that his fear prevents him from knowing it. His fear of the wind ascribes the wind power, and it reveals his uncertainty in who he understands Jesus to be when his own life is at stake.



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Peter's cry, "Lord, save me", would, to Aramaic ears, play on Jesus' own name, which means "The Lord saves". In taking him by the hand, Jesus chides him, I'd like to think gently, saying, "O you of little faith (oligopistos – thin, light, uncertain, little), why did you doubt?" and those in the boat worship him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God" (14:33). It is strange that we are not told how Peter reacts once he is back in the boat, but in Matthew 16 Peter will confess Jesus to be the "Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (16:16). I'd like to think that the evangelist had a sense of humour, for when Jesus then tells Peter, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," any of the disciples who had seen Peter start to sink would be thinking, "rock indeed"! Nevertheless, in today's passage, Peter learns that spectacular displays of supernatural powers do not establish Jesus' identity, rather, Jesus' identity is already fully expressed and perceivable when fear of other powers is banished.

St. Dominic of Guzman, whom we honour today, knew well that fear was truly an obstacle that prevented people from a relationship with Jesus. During his lifetime, many people were disenchanted with the Church and its excesses, fearful of ecclesial authorities, and desperate to escape the burden of the physical world, which was rife with illness and suffering. Throughout France, the Cathars ("The pure ones"), advocated a life of simplicity in accordance with the Gospels, but also posited that the created physical realm was sinful and corrupt, and that the true destiny of a believer was a spiritual escape. This posed significant problems for a doctrine of Incarnation, in which the fullness of God chose to dwell in an earthy, fleshy body. In his ministry, Dominic knew that physical suffering had to be alleviated before spiritual nourishment could take place. As a university student, he sold his beloved books, including the Gospel of Matthew, and gave the money to the poor. When he accompanied his bishop in an effort to dispel the heretical notions of the Cathars, he entered towns simply, without shoes, and ready to serve. His effort was to convince people that the physical state was not evil, and that Jesus had shared fully in the human state.



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Importantly, Dominic did so through dialogue and encounter with others that was unfettered by fear. When, eventually, he gathered brothers around him, they were afraid and did not want to leave community life for a life of itinerant preaching. Dominic insisted that they could not stay in monastic seclusion, saying “hoarded grain goes bad, but if it is scattered it brings forth fruit” (Tugwell, 28). More than anything, Dominic was certain that Truth (veritas) is God, and that Truth is discoverable in an ever-deepening way through Prayer, Study, Community, and Mission, the pillars of Dominican spirituality.

Our father Dominic continues to invite us to discover this truth in our times of quiet prayer, in our reading, in our togetherness, and in the ways in which we serve each other and the world. Truth-God is not a static authoritarian monarch, but a rich and vibrant experience found in silence of prayer, in the invitation to “Come!”, in encounters with others, and in learning to trust that we are heard when we cry, “Lord, save me!”.

St. Dominic, Pray for us.

Mrs. Andrea Di Giovanni, O.P.