

[Readings: I Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Psalm 85; Romans 9:1-5; Matt 14:22-23]

Once upon a time, a famous mountain climber began his most challenging task – to journey up the tallest and most dangerous mountain he had ever attempted. The journey took five days of slipping and sliding in sub-zero temperatures, blistering winds and unending blizzards. He could barely see the pinnacle of the mountain. It was within hours of reach. A great smile grew on his face as he began what obviously would be the last leg of his climb.

Getting closer to the summit, his foot slipped on a ledge and propelled him downward. Only his security rope held him still, dangling over the side of the mountain. His first mistake? He attempted the climb alone. No one was near him to save him. His second mistake? He attempted the climb on one of the worst weather days ever. He wasn't a religious man, but in desperation he cried out, "Help me, God!"

A gentle but firm voice was heard through the icy wind. "Do you trust Me?" was the question. "Yes, God, if that is you, I trust you. Help me!" "Cut yourself from the rope." "Is there anyone else up there?" "If you trust Me, cut the rope!" The man refused. His body was found a week later, frozen stiff. And hanging only ten feet above another ledge which would have saved his life.

This story sounds a lot like today's Gospel, doesn't it? The Divine Voice cries out, "Come!" "Cut the rope!" "Trust Me!" But we don't want to cut the rope, do we? We don't want to walk on deep and stormy waters, do we? We don't want to risk the unknown, the uncertain, the unproven. And so we die. We lose.

We cannot expect God to deliver us from impossible situations if we ourselves are too frightened, too weak or too cowardly to trust Him.

How do we know that God is calling out to us?

In today's First Reading, Elijah expected God to be revealed in epic proportions. But God is revealed in a "tiny, whispering sound." Some translations say that God spoke "in the silence." So, even if we think God does not hear our prayers, God does. And God responds.

Elijah was given the grace to comprehend, to understand. And so he hides his face in his cloak as a sign of humility and submission. He stands at the entrance of a cave ready to do what God wants.

Ironically, the Apostles find God in the very “eye of the storm,” don’t they? In the midst of the chaos of their ship being tossed about offshore. It was “the fourth watch.” That means that it was 3:00 in the morning. If you cannot sleep, 3 AM is tossing- and-turning time. If someone isn’t home by 3 AM, it’s pace-the-floor time. If the telephone rings at 3 AM, it’s palm-sweating time. It is the worst of times. It suggests fear and helplessness, worry and regret, loss and despair.

Have you ever found yourself in this situation? When have you called out, “Lord, save me”? When has Jesus reached out His hand to you? Does your life seem to be like a roller coaster ride, with its ups and downs, joys and suspense?

There must be something wonderfully compelling about roller coasters. Many people pay lots of money to spend hours in long lines just to ride for a minute and a half. Perhaps what is so attractive is that it provides both terror and security. When the coaster takes that first big plunge, or goes upside-down in the loop, or twists through the insanity of the corkscrew, the rider has to be absolutely convinced the ride is 100 percent safe. At the same time there’s got to be another part of the rider screaming in abject fear, certain that a horrible death is imminent.

Perhaps a roller coaster best describes the Christian ride. We’re like the disciples being tossed about by the storm. The wind and the waves of life are terrifying. We’re often blown off course, and our tiny boat is no match for the mighty sea of chaos that threatens to engulf us. At times it can seem like all is lost. But in order to rejoice in the ride, we need to be convinced that Jesus is taking care of us no matter how crazy things get. We have to be like Peter, willing to take the plunge and step out into the turmoil. If we can trust the people who designed and built the roller coaster, how much more can we have faith in the designer and builder of the universe? Yet we, like Peter, often have so little trust. Good thing that the “Divine Lifeguard” is on duty, 24/7! AMEN!

[Readings: Rev. 11:19a; 12:1a-6a, 10 ab; Ps. 45; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lk. 1:39-56]

Twenty years ago, a newspaper described some new guest suites at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. The hotel was unveiling five new “First Lady Suites” in honor of five American presidents’ wives. Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush provided advice on décor and memorabilia for the suites. Each suite has the official White House portrait of, and autographed books from, the First Lady after whom it is named, as well as a brass plate with her signature over the door. The memorabilia and special colors used in each suite reflect the individual tastes of each First Lady.

Today we celebrate the day when God brought the Blessed Virgin Mary into the Heavenly Suite prepared for her. Mary is the First Lady of the Church because she is the Mother of God. We might wonder how HER suite in Heaven is decorated! Is Mary’s “official portrait” there? No, there aren’t any. Any autographed books? No, Mary didn’t have any contracts with any publishers.

Mary’s Suite in Heaven, God’s special place prepared for her, is decorated with what she herself left us. It is something that best expresses the meaning of her life, that marvelous song of praise and thanksgiving we just heard in today’s Gospel. We call this song the Magnificat, from the first word in its Latin version. Mary’s song is not about herself: it is about magnifying God’s work in and through her for us.

These words of the Magnificat show that after her Son, Mary most clearly embodied God’s saving plan, the way of living that Jesus preached. She was most like her Son in His self-sacrifice for the sake of humanity. Mary followed her Son, “the first fruits of those who have died into everlasting glory” because she followed her Son along the ways of God’s Kingdom on earth.

The image found in today’s First Reading is traditionally interpreted as a reference to Mary in Heaven: “She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.” But the image is also one for the Church, the living Body of Christ for all generations: “The woman fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God.” The Church is still in “the desert.”

We know that in Old Testament times, “the desert” was the dwelling place of the devil and evil spirits. Jesus teaches us in the New Testament that “the desert” is a place where He goes on retreat, to be one with His Father in prayer. Such is the desert for us: it is both a place of sin, rejection and abandonment, and it is a place of renewal and rebirth.

Mary’s Assumption into Heaven is God’s testimony that Mary, the one most like her Son, already shares in the triumph of God’s risen life. St. Paul needs to explain to the people of Corinth that when we die, it’s not just a matter of the soul being freed from the body. One day the soul AND the body will rise.

My friends, you and I share in the same promise, the same hope that Mary now enjoys. On the day of our Baptism, we were called to die to sin and to the world, so that the Kingdom of God could take root and blossom in our lives. You and I are still walking the pilgrim way of faith on earth. Our eternal destiny has not yet come to pass. So what do we do in the meantime?

We welcome the Word of God into our lives. Each morning we rededicate our day to being the servant of the Lord. We ask, “Lord, what do YOU want me to do today to show Your presence in the world? How can I magnify YOU?”

We make choices that embrace the culture of life, not the culture of death. We make choices that respect and celebrate life, and we reject anything that will harm us or bring us closer to our death or the death of others.

We ask the Lord to open our eyes and our ears to hear the cry of the poor; not only the materially and financially poor, but those who need someone there to listen, to counsel, to support. We show mercy along with justice when others are in need of it. We remember that wherever we go and whatever we do, whatever good or evil we have to endure, Jesus and Mary are watching us, interceding for us, protecting us and loving us. Even if it doesn’t seem so from all appearances.

Mary has gone before us like her Son to prepare OUR suite. May we live her Magnificat in this life, so that we may find ourselves neighbors in our eternal suite with Jesus and Mary in the next. Mary, Assumed into Heaven, pray for us!

[Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matt 15:21-28]

How ridiculous prejudice is, yet how commonplace. From the earliest days that men and women have walked the earth, we have had this disturbing tendency to build walls, to separate people one from another. Whether barriers of race, nationality, religion or economic status, all of us can claim a share of guilt for maintaining those walls: the walls that separate US from THEM.

Perhaps we learned our prejudices when we were children, in our homes. Or we learned them in school, at work, in the neighborhood, even in our church.

In July, 1967, I was in the seventh grade when the riots took place in Detroit. My dad was a full-time police officer, so I heard racial comments on both sides of the conflict.

I was told by a priest friend of mine that one of his dads told his adult daughter: "You can bring home any boy you want, as long as he is the same religion as you, and the same skin color as you."

Fr. Stephen Rooney, who was associate pastor here and who died three years ago, God rest his soul, shared with me a story about a woman who came here for Mass, saw the statue of St. Martin de Porres and asked, "Who is the N-word on the wall." Fr. Rooney, known for his irreligious and quick humor, replied, "That N-word, madam is St. Martin de Porres, the patron saint of our parish. Welcome to St. Martin de Porres!"

In our readings, we hear of people who scale those walls of prejudice and division to teach us all a lesson.

In the First Reading, we hear about the plight of foreigners and eunuchs who are afraid that they will be shunned and barred from the religious services of the Jews. They need not worry. Foreigners are welcomed warmly to the point of being deemed worthy of becoming God's servants. They are to be considered full participants in God's covenant relationship. No one is to be excluded who follows the spirit of God. But they still were segregated in the temple. The Jews got the front seats, and the non-Jews sat in the back of the bus. "Observe what is right, do what is just." "My house shall be a house of prayer for ALL peoples."

St. Paul extends this open welcome to all the non-Jews whom he has visited and to whom he has preached and served. Many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe in Jesus Christ and accept His salvation. So Paul turns to all the other nations of the known world and makes no fewer than three “missionary journeys” to all the known parts of the Western and Middle Eastern world. If the Jews will not listen, maybe other people will. Are YOU listening? “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.”

Our Gospel reading for this Sunday is a hard one. But we have been prepared to read it well by first [reading Christ's parables](#) over the past few weeks. Christ's [parables](#) have asked us to read and to listen well, and to often take a second look so that we might better grasp the truth being revealed to us in images of fields and seeds and leavened bread. In this way, we have been prepared for the difficult passage given to us this Sunday. Why is this passage so hard? Because, at first glance, Christ's responses to the Canaanite woman (or lack thereof) seem so difficult! The Canaanite woman -- whose name, let's note, we do not know -- seems to be totally rebuffed by Christ.

At first, He does not even answer her piteous plea for her daughter's healing. And then, when He does reply, He informs her that He was “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” and, further, that “it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” The Jews are the sheep. All non-Jews are dogs. Welcome to prejudice! And from the very lips of Jesus Himself! The Canaanite woman comes to ask for Christ's mercy. Indeed, she asks Christ three times, persisting in her request: “Lord, help me.” Undeterred and full of hope, all three of her pleas were delivered with great humility and even as homage to Christ!

The [Canaanite woman](#) does not presume to deserve Christ's attention or God's mercy. And so she feels no rebuff. Indeed, she already knows that she is not one of the sheep “of the house of Israel,” lost or not. Likewise, she knows she is not one of “the children” who eat at the master's table.

In fact, in a striking contrast, she identifies herself as a “dog” seeking only “the crumbs that fall” from the master's table. One commentator, to soften the

blow, suggests that the word used for dog here is “pet.” The family “pet” is looking for crumbs that fall from the master’s table. “O woman, great is your faith.”

With this, the Canaanite woman invites us all to recognize that, like her, we are not one of the elect, chosen since Abraham’s calling to sit at the master’s table. We are but “[dogs](#)” [seeking crumbs](#). We are God’s “pets.”

What, then, if we, too, could approach Christ with such humble homage, like the Canaanite woman? It is what the first reading calls for: “Make joyful in my house of prayer.” We must learn that God’s mercy is not owed to us. Or to anyone. Stated more positively, God’s mercy is absolutely, entirely, completely gratuitous. It is free, if we are disposed to receive it. This is the Good News!

The message of our readings today stretch us out of our comfort zones and our convenient boxes. How do we make ourselves a more welcoming community, a more welcoming household, a more welcoming family, a true “house of prayer?” How great is OUR faith?

Perhaps we could use the words of today’s Responsorial Psalm to join her in her homage this Sunday, “O God, let all the nations praise you!” AMEN!

[Readings: Is. 22:19-23; Ps. 138; Rom. 11:33-36; Matt. 16:13-20]

While praying over the readings for today and reading some of the commentaries, I had a flashback to my dear mom giving me the key to the front door of our house on Detroit's east side. The four of us kids were still in grade school, Mom had just started a new job. That meant that now we had to take brown bag lunches to school and let ourselves in the house in the afternoon. We didn't know back then that my siblings and I were now "latch-key children."

As she gave us each a key, her parting words touched my heart and seared into my memory: "Now don't lose them!" Sound familiar?

I and my siblings gave Mom the usual reaction: a deep sigh and the roll of the eyes! "We won't, Mom." The first week I was entrusted with the key, guess what happened? I lost it. Mom was right! How do moms know? "Don't lose the keys!"

Keys are important in today's First Reading and Gospel. Keys are significant, because the more you have, or the bigger they are, the more responsible you are expected to be. That's why we give people the symbolic "key to the city." It means that they have access always and everywhere, whenever they want. I guess I'm pretty responsible with 28 keys on my key ring!

Shebna is the fellow in today's reading from Isaiah who gets the wrath of Isaiah's prophecy. He was the prime minister of the time and used his power to grant access or to deny access to the king to his financial advantage. His authority was represented by the large key he carried on his shoulder as a sign of his office.

Eliakim would follow Shebna, and HIS track record wasn't much better. He, too, falls out of favor with Isaiah. Not only was Eliakim a doorkeeper, he had access to royal employment, benefits and privileges. And he let that corrupt him.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” Paul exclaims in today's Second Reading. Today's Psalm, too, takes up the triumphant note of joy and thanksgiving. Why? Because in the Gospel, the Heavenly Father reveals the mystery of His kingdom to Peter. With Peter, we rejoice that Jesus is the anointed Son promised to David, the one prophesied to build God's temple and reign over an everlasting kingdom.

What Jesus calls “my Church” is the kingdom promised to David's son. As we hear in today's First Reading, Isaiah foretold that the keys to David's kingdom would be given to a new master, who would rule as father to God's people. Jesus, the root and offspring of David, alone holds the kingdom's keys. In giving those keys to Peter, Jesus fulfills that prophecy, establishing Peter -- and all who succeed him -- as Holy Father of His Church. His Church, too, is the new house of God, the spiritual temple founded on the “rock” of Peter and built up out of the living stones of individual believers.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know the mind of God, let alone to presume to speak for Him. Why is this so?

We as a Church get it right most of the time because we have the Holy Spirit guiding us as Jesus promised, and scores of generations of experience to guide us. This is the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. We trust the Holy Spirit and 2000

years of experience and tradition.

Much can be said about what Peter was not. His faith faltered in moments of crisis, as when he tried to walk on water. He lacked courage in the face of outside challenge; witness his waffling back and forth on the matter of Jews eating with Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter could not be depended on for loyalty, a failing that grieved him terribly in the time of his historic denial on Holy Thursday. He was as capable of getting the answer very wrong as well as getting it very right, like today. It is obvious that Peter was not chosen to lead the Church because he was perfect. His appointment did not come as a result of his strengths any more than it did in spite of his weaknesses. What made Peter a good choice, the premiere choice, is that the Holy Spirit could work through him and with him and in him.

We also remember that each of us also are entrusted with certain “keys” – the chance to open rather than close the way to Jesus. To build more bridges than we burn. To welcome more people than we turn away. To serve more people than we refuse. The great American humorist Will Rogers once said, “Even if we are on the right track, we will get run over if we just sit there!”

The prophet Micah put it this way: "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with Your God." Jesus gave St. Peter “the keys.” What are “the keys?”

The gates of hell are unlocked by Sacraments; they open the way to eternal life. When a priest "looses" (releases) the grace and forgiveness of God upon a repentant sinner during the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or when a priest "binds" a man and woman together in the Sacrament of Marriage, it's Jesus who's doing it through him.

The supernatural power of the Sacraments conquers evil every time we take them seriously and rely on the graces they provide. Where is there a locked gate in YOUR life, which needs to get blown open so that Jesus can rescue you from some sort of darkness? What will YOU do this week to utilize the Sacraments more deeply, more profoundly? Who do YOU say Jesus really is, and how do you encounter this Jesus in the Sacraments? Which Sacrament (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Marriage, Ordination, or the Anointing of the Sick) is most powerful for you personally? Why? Where does the Mother of Jesus, Mary fit in?

We pray for her intercession and protection. We listen to her as we would listen to our own mothers when she says to us as she said of her own Son: "Do whatever He tells you." I can also hear her saying this to us as well: "My children, my Son Jesus has given you the keys. Remember: Now don't lose them!" AMEN!