

The 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

1 Kings 17:10-16

Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

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When I was sixteen, I worked as a counselor at a summer camp for boys and girls, on the border between Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Camp Anderson occupied a forested site on the shore of one of the innumerable small lakes that dot the New England landscape.

Late one moonless night, some of us counselors decided to go canoeing on the lake. The heat of the day had broken, and there was a cool breeze. The extreme darkness gave our little expedition an aura of adventure and mystery. We could hear our friends talking and laughing in the canoes around us, but it was very difficult to see them.

After a while, we came upon a high diving board, surmounting a large raft, anchored well out in the lake. In my memory, the diving board stands about ten meters above the surface of the water. Inevitably, we decided to take turns diving from the tower into the lake.

When my turn came, I climbed barefoot up the tall metal ladder, and emerged on the platform from which the diving board extended. There was a steady breeze, and the shouts and laughter of my friends sounded agreeably distant.

I walked to the edge of the platform, and looked down. I was surprised to discover that it was too dark to see the surface of the lake. Being, as I thought, cautious by nature, I shouted down to the person who had gone before me, to make sure he had swum clear of the area

where I was likely to hit the water. I didn't want to land on anyone.

I wasn't able to pick a reply out of the general good-spirited uproar below, so to be safe, I waited for a minute or two before walking out on the diving board. I bounced up and down on the end of the board, in order to achieve maximum altitude, leapt, and began to fall. . . . Now I had never before dived from anything like this height. To the extent that I had thought about it at all, I anticipated that I would be in the air for a fraction of a second before splashing down in the water. Perhaps if I had been able to see the lake below, that's how it would have seemed. But now, falling through the darkness with the wind rushing past my face, my sense of time was distorted, and I seemed to be hanging in space for a very long time indeed. . . .

It occurred to me that there were aspects of the situation that I hadn't considered. I had intended to go into the water feet first. But now I realized that, in the darkness, I had no way of telling whether my feet were, in fact, pointing toward the lake. For all I knew, I was falling sideways. So I decided to pull my arms and legs in toward my body, rather than risk breaking something on impact.

This accomplished, I was still falling. It was a pleasant feeling, and I was tempted to relax and let my mind wander, but I was inhibited by the nagging knowledge that at any moment I was bound to hit the lake with a very bracing impact. Finally, I did.

Now I was in the water. Silence descended. The momentum of my fall carried me deeper and deeper. I glanced up, intending to gauge the distance to the surface, and swim toward it. But, of course, because there was no light shining on the surface, it was invisible. I had no sense of direction, and didn't start swimming for fear of exhausting my oxygen

swimming sideways. So I waited, for what seemed a very long time, until my buoyancy was definitely carrying me upward. Then I kicked to hasten my ascent, and finally burst out of the silence, into the noise of my friends' shouts and laughter. . . .

Sometimes our life of faith requires us to walk to the edge, and step off into darkness -- as the woman did who gave her last scrap of bread to Elijah -- as the woman did who gave her only two copper coins to the temple treasury. Then God alone stands between us and chaos, and we learn the *truth* of our faith.

But in another sense, every human life is a free fall through darkness. Even in the best of times, our experience of life is marred by the nagging knowledge that life is short; beauty fades; pleasure is fleeting. Our joy is inhibited by the worry that some crisis, some loss, may suddenly loom up and engulf us. As a result, we can figuratively wrap our arms around our knees and brace ourselves for the impact. A self-protective instinct can cause us to deaden our minds and our senses, so that we fail to appreciate the marvelous people, things and experiences life offers. And when a crisis does come, we can feel smothered, and alone, with no clear way back to the surface. We can be tempted to panic and despair.

To live life with enthusiasm and hope under these circumstances requires almost superhuman courage. But, thank God, *we* don't *have* to be heroes. We have Christ -- Christ who has stepped off into the darkness before us, and has won through to the light. Jesus has shown us how to live. He was alive to the beauty of the world around him. He dared to reach out in love to the people he encountered. He trusted God in the face of his passion and death. His resurrection presages our own,

and he promises to sustain and guide us as we follow him. If we fall, it can only be into his arms.