The
Brotherhood of Saint Gregory

Invites you to join us
For a Quiet Day of
Prayer and Reflection

at

St. Bart's Chapel
(325 Park Avenue at 51st Street)

on

Saturday, October 15, 2011

Soli Deo Gloria!

To God Alone the Glory!

Schedule

10:00 am:
Morning Prayer.

10:30-11:30:
Session 1 and time for questions/ discussion: "The quest for God in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and in the *Rule of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory*."

12:30 **Eucharist:**
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings will preside and Br. Thomas Mark Liotta, BSG, Provincial, will serve as Deacon.

2:30-3:30: **Session 2** and time for questions/ discussion: "Elijah the Prophet as a model of one who seeks God."

The two conferences will be presented and chaired by **Br. Millard S. Cook, n/BSG,** *Executive Assistant to the Rector of St. Bart's.*

There is no charge for participating in the quiet day and all are welcome!
To help us plan, though, will you please contact Br. Thomas Mark Liotta, BSG if you plan to attend at **tmbsg@aol.com**

"The quest for God in the *Rule of* Saint Benedict and in the *Rule of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory*"

Coffee table books can, on occasion, be quite interesting. But we you usually expect them to be kind of "arts and craftsy." Certainly aspiring photographers hope that they will one day produce a nice coffee book table which lots of people will then purchase.

But the most fascinating coffee book table that I ever encountered, showed up one day—quite unexpectedly—in the community room of the monastery where I was living twenty years ago. It had the exotic and scholarly sounding title, "*Loci ubi Deus quaeritur."* Or, in English, "Places where God is sought." And what it turned out to be, when I opened the cover and looked at the table of contents (and the first few pages) was a book that had a small entry dealing with every Benedictine men's community in the world. The text was written in Latin, German and in English. In most cases there was a photo of the monastery. And then a listing of data: the number of monks in the community (with breakdowns to show the numbers of Solemnly and Simply professed, the number of novices and postulants, the number of ordained monks). There were also listings of the kinds of apostolates the community had taken on: parishes, schools, seminaries, colleges, chaplaincies and enterprises. It was fascinating to lean how many commonalities these communities and congregations shared, and at the same time, how much variety there was. Of course much of it had to do with where the founding monks had come from: Bavaria, Switzerland, England, or Italy.

The thing that stayed with me, though, was that title, "*Loci ubi Deus quaeritur."* I suppose at that point, that I had studied Latin enough to appreciate a bit of the subtlety that the title offered. And, I had studied the *Rule of St. Benedict* enough to appreciate the implications that the title suggested. In the first case, there was that beginning word, "*Loci*," or places. It suggested that there were an amazing number of places in astonishingly different parts of the world where God was actively being sought. And the final words, "*ubi Deus quaeritur*," "where God is sought," used the passive construction (something we were always warned to avoid in English). But what this seemed to say that there were hundreds of communities of men all over the world who saw their primary role, purpose, calling, or vocation (choose whichever concept you like) was to "seek God." And in the details of the book there emerged the insight that this was a task that it was possible to undertake successfully. These were men who

seemed to have become professionals at hunting for and finding God. I suppose that, more than anything else, it seemed to me that this was a quite "catchy brand" as we would say in contemporary lingo. The monk is one who "seeks God." He is a "God-seeker" or a "God-hunter." The language suggests that it is the monk here who is active, and that God, oddly enough, is passive. And the monastery or the apostolate where the monk works is a place where God can be found. Although that might be a bit simplistic, it did contain a very important truth. And that is something that I held onto all the days that I was a monk, and is still something that is meaningful to me this day as I have continued to explore what it means for me to choose to say yes to God's call in my own life.

Young people can be very idealistic. They sometimes have very simple and even simplistic notions of how things are supposed to be. And it is often fascinating to see how they respond when they encounter a situation in which they perceive a gap between "what ought to be" and "what is."

People who are new members of religious communities, regardless of their biological age, often fit the same pattern. Thus, one of the challenges for a novice (and yes, I do use that term intentionally) is to learn. But, it is also important to find ways to channel the zeal and idealism—which the newcomer has in such abundance. And the best way that can happen, I think, is through sharing. It is vital that members who have far greater experience and most likely insight into the community be willing to dialog with the young. When that happens in an open, honest, and caring environment it is quite astonishing what the result can be.

Roughly two decades ago, I was a novice in a Benedictine monastery. I quickly observed certain things about the community. One obvious reality was that some people were easier to live with than others. And in saying that, I do not mean that it was easier for me to live with some people than others—though that is also very true. To be rather blunt about it, there were a few individuals that everyone found difficult. Even worse, those troublesome souls often seemed quite unhappy. So, it was easy for someone on the outside to think, "Why is he here?" And if the monk in question had not yet made Solemn Vows, it was easy to think "And why do they allow him to stay?"

I first really reflected on this when one of the monks whom I had found especially difficult decided to leave the community. I had a conversation about this, several days

later with an amazing and very kind monk who, at that point, had been in vows for probably 30 years. I asked him point blank why the monk who had left had been allowed to stay so long when clearly he was unhappy and was a source of pain for everyone else. His response was completely unexpected. "In the *Holy Rule*," he said, "we are told that there is only one essential quality for belonging to a Benedictine monastery. Is he truly seeking God?" His point was that the monastery does not have the right to refuse admittance to anyone who is sincerely seeking God. And he went on to explain that the Rule did not say that any of had to like everyone who came to live with us (though we did have to love them). But if they were seeking God, we could not turn them away. He also made a final point, which I will never forget. Even if a difficult monk was hard to live with, that particular community had more or less made the collective decision that it was better to err on the side of caution and not to ask people to leave unless it really was unavoidable. In the end, he said, the difficult monk would most likely choose to leave on his own. And even if others knew that would happen, they needed to give the monk in question the space to come to that realization for himself—regardless of how long that might take.

From that time on, my own perspective of what it meant to be a part of the community changed. I more clearly understood what it was that had led me to want to join the monastery and what it was that kept me there. And I came to appreciate that it really was the same desire for and longing for God that had drawn everyone with whom I lived and prayed and dined and worked to make the same commitment. And that insight helped me to be much more tolerant of others. And to be grateful for the tolerance and love which others extended to me, if they found me difficult.

But, over the many years that followed, I spent a lot of time and energy trying to understand and, in my own limited way to articulate, what it means to "seek God." Oddly enough the most interesting insight I had occurred just a few months before I entered the novitiate. Right after college, I spent two years as a seminarian for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte. The Bishop chose to send me to St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, MD, where he himself had studied many years previously. In the middle of the second year, I applied to and was accepted into the monastery for the following July. Just a few weeks after learning that I had been accepted, the seminary had a retreat which was led by a Religious Sister. She was an incredible retreat master and to this day I treasure the insights that she shared with us.

My favorite memory from that retreat, though, was a guided meditation that Sister led us through. In my own version, I found myself on a warm summer day at the monk's pond which was located just below the road which ran in front of the Archabbey Basilica. On my visits to the monastery it had been one of my favorite places to walk, and sit, and pray. But in this meditation I was walking around the pond when I heard a voice call my name from several feet back. When I looked back, I discovered that it was Jesus. We walked side by side and talked for a long time. Eventually, I grew tired and discovered that only a short distance away was a beautiful quilt laid out on the grass. Even better, a picnic had been laid out for us with many of my favorite foods; Southern fried chicken, potato salad, coleslaw, and baked beans. And for dessert there was watermelon! When the meal was over, Jesus reached over to me and hugged me. I threw my arms around him and held him close to me. But then, to my surprise he disappeared. At that point I realized that I was hugging myself. He returned and smiled at me and said that I should never doubt that he loved me that he was with me. Whenever I wanted to find him, he would be in my heart. But then he grabbed my hand and asked me to walk with him up the hill to the church. When we entered the Basilica, he walked over to the side altar where the tabernacle was located. He disappeared again, but I suddenly realized that I could see him in the tabernacle. He returned once again, and walked with my to the monastery building. When we arrived at the door he disappeared a final time. But then, when I opened the door and walked through it, there was a small group of five or six of the monks who were standing there. They turned and looked at me. And, at that point I realized that I could see Jesus in each one of them.

So, even before joining that community, I already knew of three important places where Jesus could be found. And over the many years which followed, I found that the important realization that I can find God's presence in my own heart, in worship and prayer, and in community, is one that remains as true today as it was that Fall evening in Baltimore.

While it is true that the "charism," or defining vision of a community is often closely linked to the life of the founder, it is even more obvious when that founder is also the author of the Rule of Life which the community attempts to live. And in the case of St. Benedict, so much of his Rule seems to have been influenced and shaped by his own experiences in life.

Benedict was a man "on the way up" in the Rome of the Fifth century. Born in 480 in the backwater of Nursia, his family had shipped him off to Rome as a teenager to be educated. And they also may have thought that he would find a successful career there. But the Rome that Benedict experienced shocked him to his core. See of the Pope, it seemed to him to be so wicked that he found it to be the very antithesis of the life that he in his idealism felt that the Gospel of Jesus proclaimed. So, he turned his back on the city and fled in isolation to a cave where he spent three years seeking God in silence, prayer and contemplation. As a result of that experience, and because of the insights which had been revealed to him in solitude, Benedict emerged from the cave and ultimately made his way to *Monte Cassino* where he founded his most famous monastery and composed the *Holy Rule*.

Although Benedict shared many commonly held and familiar approaches to finding God, he offered some new and surprising insights. For instance, he seems to have been the first to talk about the importance and value of work—and even of manual labor. Rather than viewing work as oppressive and penitential, he speaks of work in a loving and charming way. But the kind of work that he discusses is one in which the monk is fully engaged. By using the talents, abilities, and gifts that he has been given, the monk engages in the very act of creation. And as a result of his joyous labor he produces a surplus, which then is used not only to support the community but to minister to those who are in need. One thinks of those amazing medieval monasteries, which were the only hospital, school, and craft shop that any community knew. Because they had opportunities for training and development in a way that few others would have had, those monks not only preserved the legacy of antiquity in the scriptorium, they also produced amazing creations in precious metals and jewels which, when not looted by the Vikings or barbarians from the North, were a source of beauty and inspiration to all who viewed them. But of course the difference between the kind of labor Benedict envisioned and the oppressive, exploitative labor that so many experienced is in the intention of the one who is undertaking it. If one is open to it, any manual act can be a way of encountering God. For that reason Benedict goes so far as to say that the humble tools that the monk uses in exercising his craft should be treated with the same respect as the holy vessels used on the altar.

It is important to remember when the earliest monasteries were founded, they were often located in isolated rural areas. Later, those Benedictine fundamentalists, The Cistercians, would make an art of this. They did things like take swampy fields that no

one else wanted or was able to use and drained them-transforming a quagmire into productive fields and lands. Inevitably, though, villages began to grow up around many of the monasteries—and in some cases even cities. And so the monks who had intentionally fled the world, found the world knocking at their door. The challenge then, was to both serve the needs of those who came to them for help, while never loosing sight of the reason that they had left the world behind to live the religious life. Benedict seems to have had some idea that something like this could happen. And so, he makes an amazing statement that "All guests are to be received as Christ." Visitors are not a nuisance, an interruption, or a distraction." To the contrary, they are an opportunity to meet, love and serve Christ.

For Benedict there were three especially important channels of grace. And these he expressed as vows: Obedience, Stability, and Conversion of life. The first suggests that the monk vows to be open to hearing God's voice—to listening with his heart as that word comes to him mediated through the Abbot, the one who models the love of Christ to the community. And it seems to suggest an interactive response between the monk, the abbot, the community and God. All are called to lovingly discern God's will: for the community, and for the individual. God is sought and found through that process of listening, answering and of questioning.

In an era in which the Roman Empire was quite literally collapsing around him, Benedict called for stability. And what this means is that the monks collectively put down roots and invested themselves in a specific location. And in that "*locus*" or "place" each individual monk put down his own roots as well. Benedict felt that only with stability and commitment could God be sought and found.

Conversion of life or *conversatio morum* is perhaps the most interesting of the three vows. It suggests that the monk who has made a commitment of physical, emotional and spiritual stability-to a particular community in a particular place and time, will at the very same time paradoxically vow to change. He will agree to be open to learning, growing and developing into the person that God has loved and called him to be. And in that often painful process of "turning towards God and away from sin," the monk will seek and find God.

It is well worth noting one other important way in which Benedict provided some insight into the quest for God. He speaks of prayer, on numerous levels. But at times, it

is possible that the most important message that he communicated could be lost because it is rather subtle. Some might be surprised to learn that when he spoke of the Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, he referred to it as "the Work of God" or the "*Opus Dei*." He speaks of it in great details and spends much time laying out just how the seven-fold daily office should work. He goes so far as to say that the monk is to "prefer nothing else" to the work of God, and that when he hears the bell sound which calls him to the oratory he is to immediately stop whatever he is doing and hasten to church. But the Benedictine tradition, following, Benedict's own teaching, understood that real prayer begins with a set form—the praying of psalms, the singing of hymns and canticles, the recitation of familiar prayers. But all of that is just a preparation for prayer. The real prayer is not saying a series of words, but is that moment of grace that falls in the silence following or in-between the psalms and prayers in which one's heart opens to God and God then speaks to the monk, to the person praying, in the gift of contemplation. This is equally true in that Benedictine practice of *Lectio Divina* in which the monk seeks God through the work of reading (really listening—as in listening to the proclamation of God's word in Sacred Scripture), and meditation. And then in that silent place which is created by the monk in these first two actions, God responds by granting a sharing in his loving presence in the gift of contemplation.

Although it is the monk who is called to seek God, it is clear in the Benedictine ideal that God is willing to be found. God provides unlimited opportunities to share himself with those who are looking for him and who are willing to undertake the quest to find, love and serve him.

Perhaps the greatest Benedictine monk was Pope St. Gregory the Great. Called by the Church of his day to leave the cloister and to become the Servant of all, Blessed Gregory never stopped seeking for God. And, most surprisingly, he took what was most familiar to him, monastic life, an ordered liturgy, beautiful music and worship and stability and transformed them into a model for rethinking what it meant to be "Church" in his day. Rather than retreating in a time of chaos and uncertainty, he went on the offensive. He used monks as missionaries. Because of his concern for exploited slaves whom he encountered in Rome, he sent Augustine of Canterbury to England to carry the Good News of Christ and to plant monasteries and dioceses in which God could be sought and found. And who could have imagine that in a relatively short time, those foundations would be so successful that they in turn would carry on that same work by sending Boniface and his confreres to Germany? Gregory proved that the

Benedictine model was flexible enough to move, and change and adapt to different languages, cultures and climes.

When Brother Richard Thomas responded to God's call by taking the amazing step—in a cloistered Roman Catholic setting in Riverdale in the Bronx—of saying yes to God, he did so in a post-monastic context. I use that term, not at all negatively, or pejoratively, or dismissively. I mean to say that his own spirituality had been enriched by the living tradition of Benedict, of Francis and Dominic, of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal and of all the others who had through their own religious observance and devotion sought God across the centuries. But like Blessed Gregory the Great, whom he chose as the model and guide for the Community which he founded, he chose to adapt the model which he received to meet an entirely new context. It seems to me that the grace-filled insight which Brother Richard Thomas received through his own quest for God, was that it is possible for anyone, anywhere in the world to seek and find God. Clearly he valued the traditional practices of the established religious life: prayer, reflection, worship and commitment. But, he came to realize that in was possible for many to use those tools who would never previously been open to fleeing the world, to living in a cloister, or to living in a celibate community.

To put it even more directly, he made the new, radical, and unexpected statement that men and women who just did not fit into the traditional understanding of what it meant to be a religious could in fact seek and find God in a far different context. What a scandal to think that Anglicans or Episcopalians, organists and musicians, gay men and lesbians, and married men and women could also be called to a religious life! It reminds me of that slogan which Integrity popularized a few years ago, "All the Sacraments for all the Baptized." In this case, Brother Richard Thomas might have said, "The call to Seek and Find God is open to everyone—and not just to the cloistered, or to Roman Catholics, or to men and women in Traditional Anglican or Episcopal Communities." And, even more astonishing, they could undertake the quest for God in their own homes, in their work place in their parish and in the places where they serve others in various ministries. It was not necessary for them to do this behind the grill. No wonder that at first many did not take him or his community seriously. Or if they did, some were frightened and intimidated—and actually worked to prevent the BSG from spreading and growing (of course there is the wonderful historical precedent that the Capuchin Franciscans were prohibited from spreading outside of Italy for almost 80 years because their founder became a Protestant). And some in the Traditional

communities attempted to either limit and control the charism of the BSG or else to "tame it" and prevent it from expressing the new and radical promise which it proposed. But the grace of his own vocation, and that of the Brotherhood as a whole, is that in the almost half century which has followed his own profession of vows, the community has grown and flourished and has made an astonishing impact in this country and literally around the world.

It is interesting to note that though the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory has as it's patron a monastic and a Pope, it is rooted in a far different context. Choosing to be called Friars rather than monks, and professing the Evangelical vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, rather than the ancient monastic ones of Benedict, the BSG gives witness that it is present in a post-monastic, post-mendicant, and Post-Reformation world. It's motto of *Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God Alone, the Glory" suggests that like that ancient monastic motto, "*ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus*," that "in all things God be glorified," that God may be sought and found anywhere and everywhere and often in what might appear to be the most unlikely and unexpected of places. It reminds me, oddly enough of a line that I read many years ago in that amazing novel, *The Far Pavilions*, "O God, you are every where present, but I worship you here."

It is not the place itself must be holy, or that the people who are there must be holy, but that the holiness of God may be revealed in every place or in every person. One of our Brothers who expressed this reality so compellingly to me is our Brother Ron Fender who in his memoir, which he shared with us this summer, spoke of the way in which his own eyes were powerfully opened to the vision that Christ was present in the person of a homeless youth that he saw eating from a garbage can. Or again, our Brother Karekin, who spoke of this reality in the book which the first year novices use when he made the claim that if we are open to saying to anyone whom we encounter, "How may I serve you," we acknowledge that Christ is present in them.

In summary, the Rule and example of the BSG suggest that each member of the community has the opportunity to seek and to find God in the particular contexts of his own life. And most particularly, it suggests that in the unique ministries to which we are called and in which we serve, we find God in the persons, events and actions that occur there. I can find God in the annoying person who calls on the phone and has dialed the wrong office by mistake. I can find God in the distracting person who walks into my office when I am in the middle of a huge project and am on a tight deadline. I

can find God in the moment of quiet when I am uniting myself with my Brothers while praying Compline alone in my apartment before going to bed at the end of a long and trying day. I can find God in the joy and surprise of someone who takes a moment to send me a note to encourage me and to tell me that they love me and that I am important to them. I can find God when I kneel in my parish at the altar rail and receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The interesting thing, then, is that while each of us seek and find and serve God in varied and unique and particular ministries, we always do this in the context of our lives as members of a community. "Contemplatives in Action," Ignatius of Loyola called the companions of the Society of Jesus." United Servants from a Community dispersed throughout the world are the Gregorian Friars of the BSG. It is the love, grace, support and encouragement which we derive from the observance of our Rule, from the times that we spend together in community, and from the way that community is present through us in the times when we are apart that we are able to serve and minister to those whom God has placed in our own time and place.

We have not yet as a Community produced a coffee table book with a scholarly sounding Latin title. And, perhaps we never will. But if we did, it might well feature a section dealing with each of us. There might be a series of photos. One might show us at work in our office. Another might show us at home in prayer—sitting near our wife, or husband, or partner, or else alone. One might show us gathered at the Summer or Winter Convocation—in the Chapel, in the Community Room, in the Refectory, or on the "Smoking Porch." A photo might show us at the computer, writing an Ember Report to send to our Provincial, or at our desk writing the check to send to the Treasurer to pay the tithe. We might be seen wearing the habit, wearing the cross, wearing a witness shirt or wearing no visible sign at all. And in each of those photos would be the hidden presence of the Risen Christ.

"Elijah the Prophet as a model of one who seeks God."

Memory is an incredible reality. I have often wondered why it is that I remember some things and not others. I am sure that scientists have spent lots of time exploring this and most likely have quite good explanations for how it is that memory works. But the interesting thing about the word is that it comes from a Latin root *memor* that means "mindful of." It is an act or action of recalling or of quite literally "being mindful again" about something. The Greek word anamnesis has that same kind of meaning. And at the Eucharist when we remind ourselves of the essential reason we are there, we recall the death and resurrection of Christ and proclaim our hope in his return to us.

Perhaps the best way to remember something is to memorize it. Or else to do something to help it be even more memorable to us. In oral cultures, the primary means of remembering something is to tell a story. Another is to put the story or the idea to music. What is sung will often be remembered more easily and more readily than what is just spoken or recited.

When I think of St. Benedict, whom I never met, I do have quite specific memories. I think, for instance, of a statue of him, or of stained glass windows in which episodes from his life are depicted. I think of the Jubilee medal. I also think of the celebrations of his life, of March 21st when his *Transitus* is celebrated or of the Patronal Feast of July 11th. And, especially, on the latter date I recall music and lyrics which bring him to mind. There is a lovely antiphon that was sung each year at St. Vincent during morning prayer, "Holy Father Benedict, the man of God, blessed in word and in deed."

This antiphon has a quite lovely melody, and perhaps that is why I recall it so easily. But over many years of reflecting on the words, I came to feel that in one short sentence it really captures the essence of who I came to understand Benedict to be.

It is the sort of interesting saying which Benedictines have loved over the centuries because it includes a play on words. The very name, "Benedict," can also mean "blessed." And monks who prayed and worshipped over the centuries would have listened even more closely at the Eucharist when they heard those words "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (*Benedictus qui venit*) Of course they would have understood that *Benedictus* to refer to Christ. But, at the same time, they would also have grasped that in some special way their own "Blessed one" was someone who imitated in his own life the transforming reality of Christ.

And to be blessed meant, not only to be a recipient of God's love and grace, but also someone about whom good things was said. Another play on words is suggested because the etymology of blessed is *bene* meaning good and *dico* meaning to speak or to say.

Far more important, though, is the idea that Benedict was not only a person who had received God's grace and someone of whom God things were said, he was a person of action. His own deeds

were blessed because they revealed the power of God. And thus he is first and foremost the "man of God" who is both holy and is a father to all who chose to be his sons.

It is amazing to think that someone who lived over 1500 years ago could still be remembered, loved, and celebrated with such devotion. And even more interesting is the fact that the impact of the order founded in his name played a vital and essential role in the history of Christianity—and especially in Europe. I will not belabor the well known facts that it was the Benedictines in their scriptoria who preserved the learning of antiquity, or that it was a Benedictine Abbot who created gothic architecture or that it was a monk who discovered how to make champagne.

But equally important is the story of Benedict himself. And for a glimpse into the life of Benedict there is only one source, the *Dialogues* of our own patron, Gregory the Great. Written only 50 years or so after the death of Benedict, Gregory claimed to have spoken with monks who actually knew and lived with Benedict. And, of course, there were already at that time stories which were told about him. Gregory collected those and arranged them.

His purpose in communicating the message of Benedict, though, was more than just a desire to keep his memory alive. Gregory used the life of Benedict as a means of explaining what it means to be holy. Rather than just preaching, he told stories that both entertained and enlightened at the same time. And these stories were carefully crafted to show how one life, or for that matter, any life is able to be a model of what it means to seek and to find God. Like the evangelists who had used traditional and familiar imagery to communicate their message, Gregory turned to the Jewish and to the Christian traditions. As scholars like Adalbert de Vogue point out, there are clear examples of stories that resonate with stories which had been told for centuries about the great heroes of the faith: Moses, and David, St. Paul, and, of course, Elisha and Elijah.

Elijah the Prophet is the primary model which Gregory used to formulate the story of Benedict. Even a superficial look at The Life of Benedict reveals common elements, the raven, flour and oil, water, wind and fire, a cave, and a child who is returned to life after dying. Even the vision that Benedict has of Scholastica's death reminds us of the death of Elijah. Benedict's own happy death and the miracles which happen in his name afterwards suggest that like Elijah, Benedict continues to be a source of blessing for those who are in some way connected with him.

When Thomas Mark first asked me to speak to you today, I did not realize that our gathering would take place on the feast of Teresa de Jesus. Coincidence? Perhaps. But I knew immediately that I was interested in sharing some of my thoughts about Elijah. Whether or not he actually founded the Carmelite order—as some Carmelites have suggested over the centuries—for Carmelites Elijah is the ultimate model of what it means to be a "man of God" and through his life they find the clearest expression of what it means as a contemplative to seek and to find God.

I would like to share with you a sermon which I preached at St. James, Fordham, this past August in which I reflected on Elijah the Prophet as the model of one who seeks God.

Elijah the Prophet, the "Man of God."

Saint James, Fordham.
Sermon preached by Brother Millard S. Cook, n/BSG,
at the ten o'clock service, August 7, 2011, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on 1 Kings 19:9-18

First Sung:

Eliyahu haNavi
Eliyahu haTishbi,
Eliyahu haGil'adi –

Bim'hera v'yameinu yavoh eleinu, im mashiach ben David. (x2)

Then Recited:

Elijah the Prophet

Elijah the prophet
Elijah the *Tishbite*, (a stranger in a strange land / a foreigner)
Elijah the *Giladite* (the hill of testimony / the mound of witness)

In haste and in our days may he come to us with the Messiah, the son of David. (x2)

The short song which I just shared with you, in Hebrew no less, has for many years been one of my very favorites. It has a rather haunting minor melody which I love, and is used in two very intriguing contexts: it is sung each year at the Passover Seder, and additionally may be sung each Saturday evening at the conclusion of the Sabbath in an ancient service called *Havdalah*. *Havdalah* is that ceremony of transition which celebrates the movement from the holy and sacred (the Sabbath) back to ordinary time. Just as the Sabbath is inaugurated each Friday night with the lighting of candles, so *Havdalah* concludes with the extinguishing of the Sabbath light by dipping a lit candle into a cup of wine. And so, it ritually enacts the journey from the Day of Rest to the return of the workweek.

But the thing that appeals me most about this short song is that it is both a commemoration of that most unexpected of characters from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Prophet Elijah—as well as being a song full of longing for the

coming of the promised Messiah and for the peaceable kingdom which it has been promised that his coming will bring.

I would like to spend some time today thinking and reflecting with you about the Prophet Elijah, and about the way in which it has been suggested that his own life and experience can give us some insight into what it means for us today to be a person deeply committed to God.

Elijah is a man of mystery. He shows up on the scene, almost without introduction, and we are told nothing of his past. Consequently, he immediately causes us to think of that elusive figure from the Book of Genesis, Melchizedek, the king and priest of Salem. All we are really told about Elijah is that he is the "man of God"—and his name literally means "Yahweh is my God." He appears at a time of great need in Israel. The king of Israel, Ahab, has married a foreign pagan princess, the infamous Jezebel, who is a Priestess of Baal and Asherah. And the royal couple, we quickly learn, are up to all kinds of scandalous things—including authorizing murder to gain control of some land that they want.

The authors of the Hebrew Scriptures do not have many kind things to say about Jezebel! And as those of us who remember Aunt Esther's ranting on *Sanford and Son*, to this very day Jezebel's name continues to used as the model of what it means to be a "person of loose morals." I do wonder if Jezebel was really as bad as she was made out to be by her enemies. Clearly it was not only the fact that she tried to undermine the worship of the One True God that made her appear so evil. It was more that she has come across to us as a spoiled and pampered Princess who was accustomed to getting her way. No one had ever said no to her until Elijah came onto the scene. And as he discovered, to his great sadness, she made a very bad enemy indeed. She did not hesitate to use violence to ruthlessly crush anyone who opposed her. And that, rather than her new age religious views and practices was the real problem. The King of Israel and his wife were supposed to protect the weak and vulnerable. The cruelty and evil of Ahab and Jezebel was that the always put themselves first and did not care who had to be sacrificed to maintain their lifestyle.

But what about Elijah? How did he find himself in the situation of being Jezebel's Public enemy number one? And what did he do about it? The first odd thing to note about him is that despite his mysterious origins, the title that is applied to him, "The Tishbite" seems to suggest that he might have either been a foreigner—and thus a "stranger" or else that he comes from a completely insignificant and quite humble background. The obvious implication here is that he is not someone who would have made a likely candidate to be a prophet. He did not appear to come from a wealthy or powerful family. And he certainly does not seem to have been well connected at court. One almost has the impression

that when the cultured Ahab and Jezebel encountered him, they might have just dismissed his as some ignorant rustic from the countryside. He was hardly the kind of person that they would have invited to dine with them at the elaborate feasts they hosted at the palace.

About the only thing that Elijah seemed to have going for him was that for some inexplicable reason God had called him to the vocation and ministry of serving as a prophet. There is probably no vocation in the entire Bible that is more misunderstood than that of the prophet. Later writers, in looking back came up with all kinds of stereotypes about the role that the prophet was supposed to play. Prophets were miracle workers who had the ability to foretell the future. And they were very dangerous people who showed up in times of testing to bring down evil-doers. To correct that perspective there are two sayings which seminarians were once taught.

The first is that the mission of the prophet was not so much to "foretell" as in to predict the future, but to "forth tell," or to openly and honestly tell how God viewed a particular issue or situation. As a truth-teller for God, then, the prophet often said challenging and uncomfortable things that those in power rarely welcomed hearing. The second, and closely related saying is that the role of the prophet was to "Afflict the Comfortable and Comfort the Afflicted." Elijah made it clear to Ahab and Jezebel that God had found them wanting as political, moral, and religious leaders. Used as they were to everyone just saying yes to whatever they wanted, the royal couple appear to have been at first surprised, then shocked, then annoyed and angered by the message that Elijah proclaimed.

The important lesson to learn from the first part of the story is that all too often, God seems to choose surprising people to undertake important missions. Elijah is hardly the kind of person that most would have chosen to carry out this work on God's behalf. But God, who saw far more clearly than anyone else, intentionally choose Elijah. Perhaps part of the reason is that God saw into Elijah's heart. God saw how devotedly Elijah loved him. And perhaps God knew too, that Elijah would, in the end, be willing to say yes when times got tough in a way that someone who was more powerful, or better educated, or more politically connected would not be able or willing to do! There is an old saying that God chooses the weak and makes them strong!

The second lesson to learn from Elijah's story is that things rarely go the way that we think or hope that they will—and that may not be such a bad thing after all. At the moment of his apparent greatest triumph, after he has literally called down fire from heaven, Elijah finds himself a wanted fugitive. Rather than acknowledging that Elijah had been right and she in the wrong, Jezebel takes out a contract on Elijah and he is forced to flee for his life! Friendless, afraid and

alone, there is no time to celebrate and rejoice. Elijah runs into the wilderness, into the desert, and hides out in a cave!

In his confusion and uncertainty, Elijah finds himself at what he thinks must be the rock bottom. All his hopes and desires and expectations have come to nothing. He must regard himself as a complete failure. Everything that could possibly go wrong has done so. It is at that moment when everything else has been stripped away from him that Elijah has that transformative encounter with the living God—which will change him forever! In the end, Elijah came to realize that God's plan was better than any plan he could have devised on his own.

For those of us who know the story so well, it is funny to watch the ways that God surprises Elijah. After all Elijah had his own preconceptions about the way that God was supposed to act. He clearly seems disappointed that God had not acted in the way that he expected. But God wants to teach an important lesson to Elijah and to us who hear the amazing story of this encounter. The point, it seems is very simple. God will not be limited by our own desires, or hopes or conceptions. God is infinitely mysterious and is greater than our own ability to explain or understand. God's actions cannot be predicted, and only someone who is very foolish will claim to completely understand either God's mind or God's plan.

In this powerful story we see the way that God patiently breaks through the layers of Elijah's preconceptions. Elijah experiences the three most powerful events that one could possibly imagine—a tornado, an earthquake, and an inferno. While collectively these experiences might have left him weak, fearful, and trembling in shock, they did not reveal God's presence. To his great surprise and shock Elijah encountered God in the very last place that he would have imagined. We are told that Elijah heard God's voice in a "sound of sheer silence." God rejected all the dramatic ways that he might have chosen to communicate with Elijah and appeared to him in a simple, mundane, ordinary way—at a moment and time in which Elijah was not expecting anything at all!

A most helpful insight, which I gained, when discussing a few ideas about Elijah, came from Fr. Tobias. He pointed out that the time of rest, which Elijah spent in the cave in preparation for his encounter with God, was really a kind of Sabbath rest. And what an appropriate comment that is, because one of the major themes that one often hears when thinking about the value and purpose of a day of rest is that it allows one to really be open in a radical way to things that are new. In that sense, the Sabbath is not only a time in which God is encountered through worship and perhaps study and reflection. It is more importantly a moment of grace in which one is able to find the time to be open to God without

distractions or interruptions. And perhaps that is exactly what Elijah found in his own surprising encounter with God.

But, Fr. Tobias went on to share with me, it is also important to remember that Elijah was not able to stay in the cave. God called him to that *Havdalah* experience of leaving behind the comfort of Sabbath rest and returning back into the world—now empowered in a new way to complete the difficult mission that had been entrusted to him.

The rest of the story, which is not communicated in our reading today in the *First Book of Kings,* offers a final lesson. And that lesson is that God had plans for Elijah that the prophet could not have possibly imagined. In the end Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Talk about real drama! And for that reason it was believed that, just as he had departed, Elijah would come again. And when he did, his return would inaugurate the unfolding of God's kingdom. Because as the song that I sang at the beginning of this sermon suggested, he would bring with him "David's descendant, the Messiah."

This is the reason that the name and presence of Elijah are evoked each Seder—an empty plate is set for him at the table, a glass of wine is offered in his name, and, at the conclusion of the Seder, the door of the house is opened to welcome him and the messianic era into the home and hearts of those who are gathered. When the hymn about Elijah is sung at *Havdalah* as the Sabbath closes and the workweek begins, it reminds us that God may well be encountered not only in the holy and sacred, but in the mundane, and ordinary as well.

What do these powerful stories of Elijah teach us? Each of us is loved, valued, cherished and called by God. We might be tempted to think that we are unimportant, insignificant and that we don't have much to offer. But that is not how God sees us at all.

We might be afraid to trust where God might lead us if we are willing to say yes. And while most of us are indeed led by God into surprising situations and experiences, it is only because God truly loves us and wants what is best for us! There is a lovely old song by Nancy Honeytree that says of God, "He has chosen me to bless me and to lead me into what is best for me."

And finally, we should never presume to think that we actually know what will happen at the end. Even if we make mistakes, and failures and even choose to sin, God will not write us off or dismiss us. If we find God in unexpected ways and say yes, God may be able to use what we have to offer in powerful and amazing ways that will simply astonish us. God may call us to be prophetic—to comfort those who feel unloved, ignored, abandoned and marginalized. And God

may give us a powerful word to speak to those in authority that brings about change and growth and healing.

In the Christian tradition, Elijah truly is the one who prepares the way for and welcomes the Messiah. The Gospels suggest to us that there is a close connection between John the Baptizer and the Prophet Elijah. That it is Elijah in the person of John who helps to inaugurate the messianic era through his Baptism of Our Lord at the River Jordan. And through John's proclamation that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," as we are told just before his baptism in the *Gospel of John*. Our Lord is identified at the beginning of his public ministry not only as the Messiah, but as John goes on to tell us "the Son of God."

And in that powerful scene of the Transfiguration, it is Elijah who appears along with Moses on the mountain to counsel and comfort Jesus as he prepares to go to Jerusalem to face the passion, suffering and death which await him there. And in going down from the Mount of the Transfiguration, Jesus tells his closest companions that Elijah has indeed returned in the person of his cousin John.

We conclude then, as we began today, by invoking the power and the spirit of the Elijah the prophet, the man of God: "In haste and in our days may he come to us with the Messiah the son of David," Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.