

July 9, 2023  
Text: 1 Kings 19:11-21

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

This morning we'll begin the sermon a little differently than usual. Please take out your hymnals and open them to page 324. Here we have the Small Catechism, specifically the teaching on the Lord's Prayer. Let's look at the Third Petition.

What is the Third Petition? *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* What does this mean? *The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.* How is God's will done? *God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will.*

As Lutheran Christians, we confess that God's will is done. He is in control. His plans, His purposes will be fulfilled. Period.

That's an easy thing to say. But it can be a very difficult thing to believe. We look at the world around us. We look at our own lives. It doesn't always seem to our observation and human reason that God is in control, that His will is being done.

Yet the Lord gives us two divine sources of strength, to let us believe. The first is the Holy Spirit, God Himself, who comes as our Advocate, our Comforter, our Helper, who creates and sustains faith in our hearts. The second is God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit uses to sustain that faith.

This morning, we heard a portion of the Word that gives a great example of God's will being done, even when it didn't seem so at first. This would be the Old Testament reading – God speaking to Elijah, giving him both comfort and direction, letting the prophet know that His will was still being done.

As we consider this account, we'll see two things about the Lord's will. First, that it isn't always visible, but it is always being done, and second, that the Lord's will is over all the earth, not just over some. By this, we, like Elijah, are given comfort and direction as well.

So first, we are shown that the Lord's will is always done, even if it isn't visible. The devil loves to come and attack with doubt when things don't seem to be going well, when it seems that God and His people are not succeeding.

Elijah's ministry contains lots of instances where this is the case. He's called to be a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of one of the worst kings of Israel: Ahab. The Bible says this of Ahab: "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him." Ahab married the wicked Jezebel, and together they firmly rooted the worship of the false god Baal in the land.

It's to Ahab that Elijah is sent, to speak God's word of judgment and to call the king and the people to repent – no easy task! Yet Elijah goes about this task faithfully, speaking God's Word to the king and to the people.

At times, it seems like Elijah is having success. The Lord works great miracles through him, such as providing unending flour and oil to sustain a widow and her son, or raising that son from the dead. There's even the great occasion where Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest, to see whose god will send fire from heaven, and the Lord vaporizes not only the sacrifice but the stone altar and all the water with which it had been soaked.

Clearly, Elijah is the true prophet and Yahweh the true and only God!

But despite these signs, the people of Israel still by and large follow after idols and refuse to truly repent. Ahab and Jezebel remain hardened against Elijah's preaching, and even have the prophets of God hunted down and killed.

Elijah flees for his life, going clear to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There the Lord meets with Him, and Elijah laments to the Lord. "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

Elijah has done what he was supposed to, and yet it seems to be completely useless. His preaching has been rejected; the signs done through him have been quickly forgotten. If the Lord is in control, why has all this happened? Why does it seem like God's will is being overcome by those who hate Him?

We may find ourselves asking those same questions as Elijah. Our country, founded in large part by Christians on Christian principles, and blessed by the Lord Christ, has certainly fallen a long way. Those in power in our country are not yet openly hunting down Christians and putting them to death – as they are in other countries – but the tide has seemingly turned against the true faith.

Our president held a celebration of debauchery at the White House in honor of "Pride Month." Governors in some states have signed laws authorizing the state to take children from their parents if the parents refuse to affirm their child's transgender delusions. School boards remove parents from meetings for reading books that, while disgusting and wicked, are nonetheless available to children in school libraries.

The words "In God we trust" might still be on the money, but at this point it's a fair question to ask what "god" does it refer to.

Our nation's churches often don't seem to be doing much better. Perhaps you've seen it, but a video is making the rounds on the internet of a congregation – one with the word "Lutheran" in the name, even – reciting something called the "Sparkle Creed." It's a blasphemous mockery of the Apostles Creed that proclaims faith in non-binary God, "their child" Jesus who had two dads, and the rainbow spirit. You can't profess such a thing and still be a Christian, but this was recited by many, many people in so-called Christian churches this past month.

This, sadly, is just one of many symptoms of a deeper rot within many American church bodies, as God's Word is watered down or replaced outright in an effort to appeal to the sinful world and win its approval.

We might look out at this land like Elijah looked out over Israel and wonder what's happening. Is God's Word failing? Where have all the faithful Christians gone? Is God's will still being done?

The Lord hears our cries, as He heard Elijah's. And He responds, though not in the way we might expect. After the Lord listens to Elijah's lament, He calls him to come stand out on the mountain before Him. There, Elijah witnesses several great displays of power: a wind so forceful that it breaks rocks in pieces, an earthquake that shakes the seemingly immovable mountain, fire that scorches the earth.

But the Lord is not in any of these grand displays. No, He is in something else. "And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper." There, in a voice barely audible, is the Lord. Why appear in such a way? By this, the Lord is showing that His power is not found in earthly might, though He certainly possesses it. No, His power is in His voice, in His Word.

By His Word, He declares to Elijah what will come, what His will is. The Word decrees that He still has a plan for Elijah, and so he will not be killed by Jezebel or her minions. Elijah will not be guarded by open, visible might, but rather by the very will of God, which, though it sometimes can barely be seen, like a barely heard voice, nevertheless contains the unlimited power of God. The kings and the people may rebel against the Lord, but what the Word decrees will come to pass, and nothing can stop it. The Holy Spirit says it perfectly in Psalm 2:

"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'" The Scriptures declare that, though the nations rage, the Lord still reigns.

This is the same way in which the Lord is at work for us today. We might like it if those who marched in parades opposed to God were scattered by great winds, or if earthquakes would level those places that stand opposed to His Word. But the Lord in His perfect wisdom doesn't work that way.

People may be impressed by wonders, but they quickly forget them or explain them away, remaining in unbelief. Remember, the Lord sent fire from heaven at Elijah's request, and yet the people and the rulers still want the prophet dead. No, the Lord instead works through more hidden means, especially the power of His Word.

In that Word, He has decreed that neither worldly powers nor hell itself will prevail against His dear Church. They may scheme and press and attack, but the Lord is constantly at work to thwart their schemes and turn their attacks, shielding His people in ways that we might never even notice.

As long as it is the Lord's will that His people remain in this country, as long as it is His will that Christ Lutheran remain here in Rawlins, then we shall remain, and nothing the devil or the world might do can change that.

God preserves His people so that His Word might go forth into the world. That still, small voice, the humble preaching of the Gospel, the sound of His Word as water runs down a baby's head, the words, "this is my body" spoken over simple bread, these accomplish greater things than all worldly might put together.

Through these means, hearts are changed. Souls are brought from darkness into light. Those who were dead in their trespasses and sins are raised to new life with Christ. Through the proclamation of God's Word, Elijah was used to bring about something truly miraculous. King Ahab, who had popularized Baal worship in Israel, who had seized land from the innocent, who had murdered the prophets, was brought to repentance. It was no sign or wonder, but the proclamation of the Word through Elijah that caused Ahab to don sackcloth and ashes and humble himself before the Lord.

It is no great sign or wonder that will turn our land back from destruction. It is the proclamation of God's Word that has the power to do this. God's Word changes hearts and brings people to repentance. God's Word causes people to realize that His design for humanity is true and good, not the sinful imaginings of their hearts. God's Word brings people to abandon their pursuit of idols and to seek after what is truly good.

This Word might not seem great and powerful. Indeed, as St. Paul describes it in our Epistle reading, it is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. This is because it is all centered around Christ crucified.

The Word calls sinners to repent, to turn from the evils that only the blood of God can take away. The Word speaks of love, a love that caused the Son to willingly suffer shame and agony and the wrath of hell for the sake of sinners, that they might be cleansed. And the Word declares that this sacrifice, the all-atoning sacrifice, was made for all people.

The proclamation of Christ crucified is for all people, because He died for all people. The Gospel call goes out to all nations, for the Lord is king of all and desires that all be saved. His good and gracious will is over not just some, but all.

We see this in the Lord's directions to Elijah. He says to the prophet, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place."

Elijah may have thought that the cause of the Lord was failing, and yet the Lord shows that He is still guiding all things according to His will. And the Lord is not just the God of those who believe in Him. He is the God of all the earth.

He is the God who guides the fate of the Gentiles, such as Hazael. He is the God who is Lord over those who only bear His name halfheartedly, such as Jehu. And He is the God who still rules and reigns over His Church, appointing a new prophet who will be given a double portion of the Holy Spirit and do even more miracles than Elijah.

Those who rebel against Him and reject His Word will be met by the swords of Hazael and Jehu. But for those who cling to His Word, such as the seven thousand He has preserved, He will continue to provide that Word and prophets like Elisha to speak it.

The Lord our God still rules and reigns over all the earth. He guides the grand affairs of nations and peoples throughout the ages and at the same time watches over the humble sparrows and clothes the grass of the field.

Because He is Lord of all, we can speak His Word to all, and do so with confidence. We shouldn't – indeed, we mustn't – keep “our religion to ourselves,” dividing the world into “secular” and “sacred” zones. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, as the Psalm declares – not just the sanctuaries and Sunday School classrooms. We speak to those who are openly following other gods – like Hazael. We speak to those who might only be “nominal” Christians – like Jehu.

We speak because we speak of Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. The Word of God might look weak and foolish to the world, but as we heard, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” The Word of God contains the power to bring true and lasting change – eternal change – by transforming the hearts of people. The Lord in mercy has put that Word in our hearts and also on our lips, that we might proclaim it to the nations.

We need not fear, because the Lord who preserved thousands of His people in the face of a murderous pagan queen is the Lord who preserves us in the face of an increasingly pagan society. Though we may not see His will at work or understand how it is at work, nevertheless His will is being done.

He is breaking and hindering the evil plans and purposes of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, and He will preserve us and all His saints, strengthening and keeping us firm in His Word and faith until we die. As He shows us in Elijah and all throughout the Scriptures, this is His good and gracious will.

In the name of Jesus, amen.