

We have a bit of a theme in our Old Testament readings lately. Last week, with Joseph and his brothers, we heard about how God turns those things which are meant for evil against His people into things that are good for them. This week, with Elijah, we hear about how God brings about His good and gracious will, even when we can't understand how.

Again, last week, we heard about great evil meant against one of God's people. It's very similar this week. The prophet Elijah faces considerable evil directed against him. Before we talk about the evils specifically, it helps to remember the context in which those evils are happening, as it helps us see just how bad they really are.

Right before the events of our reading, it seems that the word of the Lord spoken through Elijah had finally triumphed. In the great showdown on Mount Carmel, the Lord God had sent fire from heaven at Elijah's prayer, consuming the sacrifice and vaporizing the stone altar. The false prophets of Baal had been shown to be frauds and liars, and at Elijah's command the people executed them all in keeping with the Law of Moses.

After this, the Lord sent rain upon the land, bringing an end to the great drought which He had sent as punishment for the people's idolatry. Good had finally triumphed over evil, right?

Wrong. No sooner does the wicked Queen Jezebel hear of this than she swears to have Elijah put to death. Despite the obvious power of the true God, and the utter failure of her own gods and prophets, Jezebel clings to her evil ways. She refuses to repent in the face of obvious evidence, and even more uses all her power as the queen of Israel to seek Elijah's life, to take it away.

Likely even more disheartening for Elijah was the reaction of the people as a whole. Elijah laments to the Lord, "The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword." It seems the triumph on Mount Carmel was only a flash in the pan, gone as quick as it had come.

The people do not rise up to defend Elijah or the word of the Lord, but continue as they had before. They go along with Jezebel and Ahab's repression of the true worship of God. Perhaps some go along willingly. Perhaps many are indifferent. And perhaps some lack the courage to stand up for the truth. Regardless, it seems that the Israelites who claim to be the people of God have rejected that very same God.

Elijah's context and persecutions have some fitting parallels for us today. Elijah witnessed a seeming resurgence in the true worship of God only to watch it fall apart. The Christian Church in the United States has witnessed much the same. While the Christian countries of Europe followed a generally secularizing trend moving away from the faith, especially after World War II, the U.S. seemed different. Here, in the Forties and Fifties, there seemed to be a resurgence of Christian belief, both in individual homes and in the nation as a whole.

But it wasn't to last. Cracks began to show, as Christian denominations and individuals began compromising and watering down their faith for the sake of appealing to a larger group, trying to get a larger share of the up and coming baby boom population.

Sometimes, the assault on the faith was carried out by those in power, modern Jezebels doing things like legalizing no-fault divorce, banning prayer and Bible reading from schools, giving government funds to abortion providers, and redefining marriage.

At the same time, Christians in America, like the people of Israel, often went along with this slide, valuing entertainment over truth, yielding Sunday to the world's activities, replacing "repent and believe the Gospel" with "be nice and don't hurt anyone's feelings." Our fathers in the faith would be rolling over in their graves at the state of Christianity in our country, if it wasn't for the fact they are in the bliss and peace of heaven.

So what to do, then? What can turn around the ship of Christendom before it sinks below the waves? Surely, we need a great working of God in this country, and in the world. Perhaps that's what Elijah thought as well. Maybe what was needed was just another sign, greater than that of Mount Carmel.

Having traveled to Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai), the prophet cries out to God about the horrible evils afflicting both the prophet and the nation. And the Lord hears, summoning Elijah out of the cave to stand before Him. On the mountain, Elijah witnesses great displays of power. Winds so strong that they break rocks in pieces. Earthquakes shaking the mountain, something thought to be immovable. Fire, not just on an altar, but all over, consuming everything in its wake.

But... the Lord was not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, though He had used all these things before. All that might and power on display, and yet God wasn't present in it.

Where is God to be found? We read, "And after the fire the sound of a low whisper." A low whisper, or if you remember this in the King James, "a still, small voice." This is the opposite of everything that just took place. In fact, you might think that Elijah would've missed it, with his ears ringing from all the power that He'd just witnessed.

But there, in that barely audible whisper, was the Lord God Himself, speaking His word to His prophet. It would not be great signs and wonders that were the answer to Elijah's plea. It was the word. The word of God would be the answer.

Again, the parallels for us today are numerous. Confronted with the slide towards sin and unbelief in our nation, we're tempted to look for great signs of power. Maybe we think that having the right political figures wielding the power of the government in our favor will be what saves us. Maybe we think that our country needs to fall on really hard times, face disasters even, before it will repent and turn. Maybe we hope for actual signs and wonders to silence the mockers and show the power of our God. As with wind, earthquake, and fire, God has worked through these other things before.

Yet they are not what He has given to His Church. Instead, He has given us the word, the Bible. We might be tempted to think that this word is no match for what's out there, that this simple book and

the words it contains will be swept away by everything going on. How can the voice of truth keep from being drowned out by the lies that get shouted ever more loudly from seemingly all directions? And yet, God has promised that, where His word is, there is His power as well.

Thus St. Paul, a wandering teacher of an upstart movement in the vast Roman Empire could boldly declare, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Though Paul was jailed and eventually executed by the Romans for his proclamation of the Gospel, the still, small voice speaking through Paul and the other inspired authors would eventually lead to the conversion of the Roman Empire itself, laying the foundations of Christendom that would last for over a thousand years.

The God who spoke to Elijah, and through Elijah and Paul and all the other prophets, apostles, and evangelists, is the God who is with us still today. And his word, though it may seem a quiet whisper, contains the boundless power of the Almighty to change hearts and minds, to convert individuals and nations.

That power is illustrated in a peculiar way to Elijah. The Lord hears the prophet’s lament. And how does He respond? “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.”

It seems almost dismissive. Rather than immediately address the prophet’s concerns, the Lord gives Elijah his next set of instructions. Why? Does the Lord not care about Elijah’s suffering? Of course He does! But what the Lord is doing here is showing that He is still in control, and His will will still be done.

Yes, the Lord is aware that both the rulers and the people have rejected Him and are striving to blot out His holy name from Israel. But the thing is, they are woefully unable to do so. God’s plan will be carried out. If the people repent and go along with it, they’ll be blessed. But if they fight against it, the only thing they’ll destroy will be themselves.

After declaring to Elijah His plan for the near future, the Lord then kindly gives Elijah comfort. “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” God has not forgotten His faithful people who remain in Israel, but in fact has preserved them from the persecutions of their idolatrous rulers and countrymen. Elijah is not alone. There are still thousands the Lord is preserving by grace, and He will not let them – or Elijah – be destroyed by the wicked.

This is very similar to what our Lord has spoken to us by His holy word. In that quiet whisper, the Lord of the universe has revealed the future of all things. By reading the Bible, we know how the story ends, so to speak. God wins. Christ triumphs. The holy Christian Church is preserved to the end, while the devil and all the demons and humans who followed him in attacking the Church are thrown in to the lake of fire forever.

When does this happen? In His perfect wisdom, the Lord hasn't told us. Revelation is the way it is on purpose! But though its imagery and numbers can be confusing, the overall message is clear. The good and gracious will of God will be done. The Son of God overcame the powers of sin, death, and hell on the cross, and though that message is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, it is the power of God to eternal life for those who are being saved.

As we endure the evils of this world, we are given comfort by the words of our Lord. Those who are baptized into Christ, who lead lives of repentance and faith, are like the 7,000 whom the Lord preserved in the time of Ahab and Jezebel. We have been washed by the blood of Jesus, sealed by the sign of the cross, made members of the very household of God.

We, and God's people of all times and places, are like those spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, who declared, "He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing." Not one is missing. Though kingdoms and nations will rise and fall, and some people will reject the Gospel while others rejoice in it, our God will not fail to bring about the good for His people.

In the name of Jesus, amen.