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"A God Who Sets His Face Toward You"
Text: Luke 9:51-62; 1 Kings 19:9b-21 (Galatians 5:1, 13-25)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus had been going about His business for some time now. Healing, visiting, preaching, compassioning, welcoming, blessing, teaching, feeding, raising, strengthening, mercying, forgiving. But now the days drew near for His real work. The reason why He came. The small talk was over. Now it was down to brass tacks. All this other stuff was great, but it would all mean nothing had Jesus not gone to Jerusalem. He could have stayed up in Galilee and Samaria, kept doing amazing things, lead a comfortable life.

But Jesus wanted so much more than that. Not for Himself, of course, but for you. That all that He did be not just for a time, but forever. To give the people then, and you now, life forever. And there was only one way to do that: the cross. To die and then rise from death. To atone for your sins and so break the power of sin, death, and the devil over you. And so ***when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up*** - that is, taken up on the cross, He did not turn away - ***He set His face to go to Jerusalem***. He would not be stopped. He was a man on a mission.

And thank God for that! But not just that Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem, but that long before this, God set His face toward us. That is, in fact, why Jesus was there in the first place. Because God sets His face toward us. He doesn't turn His back on us, leave us, or ignore us. When we turn the wrong way, when we turn toward sin, when we turn away from God and toward any of the myriad things in this world that we fear, love, and trust more than God, still God sets His face toward us. Which, really, is our only hope.

Just ask Adam and Eve. Who came to them and called to them and turned toward them and promised them a Saviour after they sinned and were hiding in fear and shame?

Ask Abraham. Who came to him and called him and promised to make him a great nation and give him a son when he was worshipping false gods and had given up on having an heir?

Ask Moses, who was settling into a comfortable and quiet life in the desert, tending sheep

after escaping Egypt as a murderer. Who came to him in the burning bush and spoke to him and showed himself to him and sent him back to Egypt to lead His people out of their slavery there, and who divided the Red Sea for them and gave them manna to eat and water from a rock to drink?

Ask . . . ask Elijah.

We heard about Elijah in the Old Testament reading today. He didn't want to be a prophet anymore and so he ran away. Even though God had just given him a great victory over the 450 prophets of Baal - 450 against 1, and the one, won! Still, Elijah thought, he could read the handwriting on the wall. The wicked had grown mighty and the faithful all seemed to have melted away. He was on the top of Queen Jezebel's most wanted list. So time to get out of Dodge.

And God does as He usually does. He set His face toward Elijah and came to him. A God of grace, to be sure.

But *you're* not so sure, are you? Because, to be honest, there *are* times when it seems God isn't like that, and you think you're on your own. That God's face *isn't* toward you. That He's a million miles away and doesn't see the toubles in your life - or if He does, He's not doing anything about them. When your life takes a sudden, unexpected turn; your prayers seem to go unheard and unanswered; everything is going wrong for you and right for everyone else; your pain and heartache and confusion and struggles seem like they will never end. It seems as if God has turned His back on you.

Maybe you remember a time like that in your life. Maybe you're in one right now. Maybe you haven't felt like that *yet* . . . but that day is coming. Because that's exactly how satan wants you to think and feel. And so he comes at you like he did Elijah, with big, earth-quaking problems and troubles, loud, thunderous accusations, burning doubts and worries, and if all you see and look at is those things - yeah, yikes!

But here's the thing: the bully is full of bluster; the strong one is quiet and confident. The bully rants and rages; the strong one stands firm and steadfast. The bully wants you to pay attention to him and fear; the strong one sets his face toward you to defend you. He doesn't need to yell or rage; He simply says: *I got it. I'm here for you. I'll take care of you. Don't worry about him. He's all talk. I got it*.

That's how God was with Elijah and what He told him. And it's why Jesus ***set his face to go to Jerusalem***. It is the quietness and confidence of a God in control, who is not panicking, but who comes peacefully to give peace. The situation is well in hand to God, who knows what has been done, needs to be done, and what <u>will</u> be done. And how He will do it.

So when we doubt God, or worry, or think Him a million miles away, it is unbelief, of course. Not believing Him or His promises. Our thinking that God will not act now as He has in the past. That God will not act for me as He has for others. That I cannot be certain of the future and what God will do.

But in all those ways, with that kind of thinking, we are really reflecting onto God what is true of ourselves. For in truth, it is *we* who are unreliable, unfaithful, inconsistent, and uncertain. It is *we* who change from one day to the next. It is *we* who waver in our determination, and whose promises are at best hopeful outcomes, and at worst empty words. It is *we* who put our hands to the plow and then look back. It is *we* who run away and hide in caves of despair and hopelessness - not God. And yet, how often do we think this of God, *and so accuse Him of our sin?*

So how does God respond this? *He takes it.* Literally, He takes it. He does not reject us, but takes our sin, ***sets His face to go to Jerusalem***, and takes it to the cross. He *proves* His faithfulness. Not because He needed to prove it, but because we who are weak and uncertain and fearful and doubting need it. And so God gives it. He proves His faithfulness to us again and again and again. For He is determined to be not just *a* God, but to be *your* God, *your* Saviour. That as St. Paul said in his letter to the Galatians that we heard today, we would be set free to live a new life, and no longer live, as St. Paul said, ***under the yoke of slavery to sin.***

That's why Jesus rebuked James and John, when they asked Him: ***Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*** Ever been there? Thinking of a few people who could use a little fire from heaven to light them up? Me too.

The disciples didn't get it. Yet. That fire they wanted for others . . . Jesus came to take it Himself. That it not consume the Samaritans, that it not consume James and John, and that it not consume you and me, but that it consume Him on the cross. No matter who you are or what you have been. **Jesus is the face of God toward all people.** That you may know His love and His faithfulness, His giving and self-giving, and receive His forgiveness and life.

So today, Jesus still is sending messengers to prepare His way. Because still the call is going out to follow. To follow Him. But there are a million reasons not to, isn't there? Someone asked me this week about those we heard about in the Holy Gospel, what was so wrong with what they said? Why couldn't they have done those things and *then* gone to Jerusalem and followed Jesus? I suppose they could have. But as I thought about that, it seems like a very 21st century attitude to have - that there is plenty of time, we live in a world where we can travel freely and easily, and that taking care of the things of this world comes first . . . and *then* I'll follow, Jesus. *Then* I'll come after you. Then.

But you know how that goes. Something else then comes up, 'cause something else

always comes up. Life doesn't slow down, but gets busier and busier. Which I think is yet another tool satan uses - to make us too busy for Jesus, too busy to follow now. And the truth is, none of us knows how much later there is for us.

And Jesus doesn't want His gifts for you later; He wants them for you now. And He wants a new life for you now. Not only because later might not come, but also because it's better for you now, to be free from worry and anxiety and doubt and fear. And live in His quietness and confidence.

So today, Jesus still is sending messengers to prepare His way. Pastors to preach, friends to counsel and encourage us, to call us from the entanglements of this world and the false and empty promises of sin, to find your life in Him alone. The life He gives to you in baptism, where you are born from above as His children and enlivened with His Holy Spirit. The life that He nourishes and sustains in you with His Word of forgiveness and with the food of His Body and Blood. The life that He bids you live now, and that He promises you will live forever. *Follow me*, He says, to you.

And yes, *as it was in the beginning, <u>is</u> now, and <u>will be</u> forever*. What God has done in the past, He will do now and in the future. His faithfulness to others will be His faithfulness to you. For in setting His face toward Jerusalem, He has set His face toward you. To give Himself *for you* on the cross, and now to give Himself *to you* here in His Body and Blood. That you never be forsaken, that you never be alone, that ***<u>your</u>*** face be always set toward ***<u>Him</u>***. Toward Him who <u>is</u> your God, your life, your Saviour, your all.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.