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Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Our Comfort in Dark and Nightmarish Days”

Text: 1 Kings 19:9b-21; Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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

Elijah was hiding. Israel, he said, was out of control. Insane and drunk with idolatry. He could no longer be their prophet. So he ran away and was in hiding. I'm the only one left, he said, and I'm next to be killed. He was a little bit mad, a little bit depressed, and a whole lot scared.

Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord, he was told. So he did. And standing there, *a great and strong wind* came, which *tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks*. That's a wind greater than any EF-5 tornado or Category 5 hurricane. Imagine the fear of Elijah standing in the midst of that.

*After the wind* stopped there was *an earthquake*. We're not told how strong it was, but more fear-inducing destructive force as Elijah stood in the midst of torn mountains and broken rocks.

And after the earthquake stopped, a *fire*. You've seen the pictures of the fires out west, consuming forests and communities - the eerie orange glow, the smoke that takes your vision away and make breathing difficult at best, and the heat bearing down on you. For Elijah, fear upon fear upon fear.

How long did it all take? How much time passed between each destruction? Did Elijah just stand there and watch it all, or cower in fear? We're not told. But then the Lord spoke to Elijah. *A low whisper*. A calm and calming voice. Like the voice of a mother to her child in the middle of the night after a nightmare. *Shhh. It's okay. I've got you.*

And the Lord asks Elijah basically this: *What are you afraid of?* What is happening that is greater and more fearsome than you've just seen and felt? Too big for the Lord? Elijah tells him, again. But the Lord already had a plan, was already dealing with it. Here's who you're going to meet. This is what you're going to do. For there are still seven thousand faithful in Israel, who have not bowed their knees to Baal or kissed him, have not welcomed him into their lives, and I'm going to take care of them. And you. *Shhh. It's okay. I've got you.*

Perhaps you feel a bit like Elijah. For it seems as if Baal is alive and well in our world, in our country today, doesn't it? In our culture which is insane and drunk with idolatry. The idolatry of self-determination. The idolatry of anything goes sexuality. The idolatry of money and happiness. The idolatry of death. For an idol, a false god, is anything that we fear, love, and trust instead of the one, true God. And we see what happens when what you fear, love, and trust is threatened or taken away. There is anger and rage. People trust that death will help them and take away their problem, and so they want and want to keep euthanasia, assisted suicide, and abortion. People love their freedom to be whoever they want and do whatever they want with no limits, and rage against you if you disagree. And money as an idol? There's a reason why the economy is consistently cited as the most important issue in every election.

And we're standing in the midst of destruction like Elijah did. The great winds of roaring and yelling and threats, the earth shaking stomp of marches and hordes filling the streets, and the fires of both hate and literal fires being set to destroy those who dare speak against the idolatry. And maybe you feel like the only one not insane and drunk on this in your school, in your office, in your neighborhood. And running away seems like not such a bad idea. And like Elijah, maybe you're a little bit mad, a little bit depressed, and a whole lot scared.

But like at the time of Elijah, the Lord already has a plan, and is already dealing with all this, though we may not know it and cannot possibly imagine how! There are still many - probably more than we know - who have not bowed the knee to our modern-day Baals nor kissed him and his agenda. So to us, too, the Lord asks: *What are you afraid of?* And to us, too, living in this darkness, in these nightmare-ish times, the Lord says: *Shhh. It's okay. I've got you.* Words that He fulfilled in Bethlehem and on Golgotha.

For that is where this battle is ultimately fought and won. The disciples in Samaria wanted to call down fire from heaven and consume those who did not and would not receive Jesus. Fight wind with wind, earthquake with earthquake, fire with fire. That's our way. But not Jesus' way. Jesus rebukes them for such thoughts and words. **Jesus**, instead, *sets His face to go to Jerusalem*. That means to go to the cross. For that's His plan, how He will deal with all this. And nothing is going to stop Him. That's where great winds of mockery will be hurled against Him, and the earth will quake at His death, and the fire of God's wrath against all our sin and idolatry will consume Him. Him, whose two knees were the only two knees which never bowed to our Baals or kissed and welcomed them.

Yes, the only two. For although our knees may not bow to the Baals who are being celebrated all this month or which raged this weekend, we've got our own. Our own comforts, our own desires, our own hopes and dreams that get in the way of our following Jesus. Like those we heard about today. Who told Jesus, *I will follow you wherever you go*, but when told it would be uncomfortable . . . Or to whom Jesus said, *Follow Me*. Oh, I will, but first . . . And what about this, and what about that, and . . .

Lord, I will follow you IF . . . Lord, I will follow you BUT . . . So Jesus told the one, *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*. And hearing that, I realize: **I AM not fit** for the kingdom of God.

To which the Lord say, *Shhh. I've got you*. Your sins, your failures, I died for them. I got down on my knees to serve you and save you. *I forgive you all your sins*. And while you're not fit for the kingdom of God, I baptize you and make you fit, for I make you a child of God in those waters. And your lips that have kissed the Baals I have touched with My Body and Blood here and cleanse them. Do not fear. Follow Me. Live and walk not by the spirit of the world, but by the Spirit - the Holy one - that I've given you. Which means don't bite and devour and consume one another. *Wrong spirit*. Don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. *Wrong spirit*. Don't engage in the works of the flesh. *Wrong spirit*. Love your neighbor as yourself. That's *the Holy Spirit*. Live in your freedom from sin. That's *the Holy Spirit*. Holy fruit. That's of *the Holy Spirit*.

Now, *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* may not seem like very powerful weapons in the midst of the great howling winds, earth quaking marches and hordes, and fire-breathing mobs. Like the disciples, calling fire down from heaven seems to make more sense! But in Elijah's day, the only fire that came down from heaven consumed the sacrifice on the altar, not the people. And in Jesus day, the fire that came down from heaven consumed the sacrifice of the altar of the cross, not the people. The people - that's who the Lamb of God came to save; to win. He doesn't want to defeat them. He wants to win them and make them His own.

And that's what *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* are for. For that's Jesus. And it's us who are in Jesus. That fruit given to us, living in us, and growing in us. Jesus was crucified for that. Maybe you will be, too. The Lord saying to you, *Shhh. It's okay. I've got you*, may mean the blessing of taking you out of this idolatrous world. But it may mean leaving you here, too. Like Elijah. Sending you out and sending you back with His Word, which though a low whisper, thunders with the power of God's love and forgiveness.

And I wonder . . . did the people God picked to help Elijah surprise him? Hazael, Jehu, Elisha - were these people Elijah would have picked, or did he think: *Who? Lord, are you sure? Them? Really?*

But that's what they said of Jesus, too. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? He's just the carpenter's son! But from the one born of a virgin, laid in a manger, with no place to lay His head, rejected by the elite and even by the folks of His own hometown, thought a lowly Samaritan and demon-possessed, God worked the greatest good, defeating all the powers of evil for all time. In Him, forgiveness and life for all people, ever. No one excepted. All called to repentance, all called to forgiveness, all called to life.

Many people were celebrating on Friday with the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, and

rightly so. It is a step in the right direction. But only a step. It also riled up many to anger and rage, rage that is directed against God and His Church and His Word, just as in the days of Elijah. And like with Elijah, it may be said of you and me, too, that they are *seeking our life, to take it away*. We can run away, be silent, and hide. The great prophet Elijah did! Or we can learn from Elijah. That the low, quiet Word of God can stop the winds, calm the earthquakes, and extinguish the fires. That the Word of God is meant not just to turn others, but to turn **US** around too, to go back where we belong, and do what has been given us to do. And we will not be alone. There will be those the Lord sends to help us. There will be the thousands who also have not bowed their knees or puckered their lips to Baal. But even if none of those, there is the Son Himself, who has promised to be with you always. And those are words He backed up. He was with us in birth, with us in life, with us in death, and has promised we will be with Him in resurrection. And until that day is with us in His Spirit, the Holy one.

*So when the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.* That is, He set His face to go to the cross. So for us, too, when the day draws near for us to be taken up - and maybe that day will be soon! - set your face toward the cross. The cross in the waters of baptism that wash you with the life of the cross, the cross in the words of the Gospel which proclaim to you the forgiveness of the cross, and the cross in the Body and Blood on the altar which feed you the Passover Lamb who hung on the cross. And all that you need, you have. To go out, to go back, and live. Even in these dark and nightmarish days.

*Shhh. It's okay. I've got you.*

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.