

27 June 2010
Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Setting 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 him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem.

When you turn your back on someone, it is to ignore them or leave them. It means that you do not want to even look at them or listen to them; you want nothing more to do with them. But if you set your face toward someone, that is quite different. That is to pay attention to them, to look upon them, to interact with them. It is also what you do when you are reaching for a goal.

Today, Jesus ***sets His face to go to Jerusalem***; for in Jerusalem, He will reach His goal - to be lifted up upon the cross. That He “sets His face” means that He is *determined* to go there; nothing will stop Him. But it also means that **Jesus is the face of God turned toward us**. For Jesus is the face of our God who did not turn away from us in our sin, but instead turned *toward* us to be our Saviour. And so Jesus shows us who God really is. Our God who is paying attention to us, looking at us, interacting with us, caring for us, coming for us, and dying for us.

Yet not just in Jesus - this is who God has been for us all along. This is who God is in not turning His back on Adam and Eve, but calling for them and turning toward them and promising them a Saviour. This is who God is in coming to Abraham, and repeating the promise of a Saviour to him. This is who God is in coming to Moses and sending him to Egypt to set His people free from their slavery. This is who God is in not turning His back to His people when they rebelled against Him time and time again in the wilderness, but keeping them and leading them to the Promised Land. This is who God is in sending His messengers, His prophets, to His people, to call them from their sin and to trust in Him alone.

This is who God is, and always will be. A God who does not turn His back, who does not forget His promises, and who has set His face - in grace - toward you. To be not just a God, but to be *your* God, *your* Saviour.

Though to be honest, it seems, at times, as if He *does* forget; as if His back *is* turned

toward you. Those times in your life when God seems a million miles away; when it seems as if your prayers go unheard and unanswered; when everything is going wrong for you and right for everyone else; when the pain and heartache and confusion and struggles seem like they will never end.

That is how the prophet Elijah felt. The wicked had grown mighty and the faithful seemed to have all melted away. He did not want to be a prophet anymore. God had turned His back on him. And so he turned his back on Israel and went and hid in a cave.

But as with Adam and Eve, as with Abraham and Moses - as God always does - He comes to Elijah. Not in the expected way - in a big, mighty, fearsome earthquake or wind or fire - but in the quietness, the stillness, of a low whisper. **The quietness and stillness 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 and what will be done. God will deal with this, too, even having fearful Elijah play a part in it.

So, God asks Elijah, ***what are you doing here?*** Why are you not where you're supposed to be? Why are you in this cave and not in Israel? Why are you in despair and not in hope? Why are you in fear and not in faith?

The answer is, of course, unbelief. Unbelief, which is the belief 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, 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.* He does not reject us, but takes our sin, and ***sets His face to go to Jerusalem.*** He takes our sin and takes it to the cross. He proves His faithfulness. Not because He needed to prove it, but because we need it. We need it in our weakness and fear and sin. 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.*

And this is why on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus sends messengers on ahead of Him, ***to make preparations for Him,*** or to prepare the way for Him. It is the same phrase

used for the work of John the Baptist, who went before Jesus to prepare the way for Him by preaching repentance of sins, **and** by pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb of God who came to take the fire of God's wrath against sin upon Himself on the cross, so that it would not be upon us. That for us there would be forgiveness. That 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, who asked Him: ***Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*** No. They didn't get it yet. That Jesus came to take that fire Himself. That it not consume the Samaritans, that it not consume James and John, and that it not consume you and me. **Jesus has come as the face of God toward all people.** No matter who you are or what you have been. That you may know His love and His faithfulness, His giving and self-giving, and receive His forgiveness and life.

And to this end, Jesus is still sending messengers to prepare His way. Pastors, *not* to call down fire from heaven, but to preach repentance and give His gifts. To call all people 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.

That is the life lived always under the face of our Lord that is toward *you*. Toward you not as a divine policeman, watching for you to break the law so He can zap you! But toward you as the Good Shepherd - to guard you from danger, to bring you back when you wander, to forgive you, and to keep you. That under His grace and care, and with His Spirit living in you and guiding you, the fruits of the Spirit grow in you.

For *as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be 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 your face be always set toward Him. Toward Him who is 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.