The primary text from which I will be preaching is our Old Testament lesson. But this passage is, I think, rather hard to understand on its own. Thanks be to God that his Spirit has guided the Church to place texts alongside of one another to be read and heard together. Our Psalm from this morning will guide us in hearing the voice of the Lord in our Old Testament reading, particularly one verse from the Psalm: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (85:10). But first, to our Old Testament reading.

Our Old Testament reading this morning is one of the many mountain-top stories that the Church, in her wisdom and by the Spirit’s guidance, has included for the Sunday lectionary. When the Lord tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his beloved and only son Isaac, it is on a mountain that the Lord stays the knife-laden hand of Abraham and instead provides a ram to be sacrificed. The Lord calls Moses up onto a mountain and there gives the Law to his people Israel. Again the Lord calls Moses up onto a mountain and Moses is there permitted to see the glory and splendor of the Lord. It is also from a mountain that Moses was granted to see the land promised to Israel, even though Moses himself would not enter it. The Temple was built at the top of a mountain by King Solomon, in the same place that the Lord had once appeared to King David.1 When John was given the vision of “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb,” the Church, which was “prepared as a Bride adorned for [Jesus] her Husband,” coming down out of heaven at the end of Revelation, John was taken “in the Spirit to a great, high mountain” (Revelation 21:9–10). And the center around which all of these revolve is Jesus Christ, ascending a mountain with Peter, James and John, and being transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming as white as light itself.2

Our reading this morning stands together with these others, as times when God gives unique revelation and insight into who he is, and of the work that he is accomplishing on earth through his Son, in Israel and in the Church.

The first book of Kings starts with one kingdom under one king. King David is still alive, but he is dying: what shall happen to the kingdom of Israel after the beloved King David is no longer on the throne? The Lord had promised to Abraham that through him and his descendants, the whole world, every family, shall be blessed.3 The Lord promised David that he would have an offspring who would sit on David’s throne, and “the throne of this kingdom shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:12–13). Shall the promises that God made to Abraham, which were confirmed with Isaac and Jacob, and the promises also made to David, shall these promises be fulfilled?

---

1 According to 2 Chronicles 3:1. The appearance of the Lord to King David is recounted in 1 Chronicles 21.
2 Matthew 17.
3 Genesis 12, 15.
The rest of the two books of Kings shows this people, this one kingdom, being divided. After Solomon’s initial and youthful zeal for the LORD it surely appears as if David’s descendants will continue in the same trajectory as David, having a heart undividedly dedicated to the LORD. But Solomon’s wisdom gives way to a life of folly, and he enters into political covenants with foreign kingdoms, which Scripture equates with adulterous idolatry. After Solomon, and as a judgment on Solomon’s love for his many wives and his love for their foreign gods, the kingdom is taken from him.

The kingdom of Israel is divided. Israel is divided in that there are two kings, one in the north and one in the south. Israel is divided in that there are now two places of worship, Jerusalem where the LORD had established the Temple, but another mountain in Samaria. Israel is divided in that each kingdom enters into covenants with the surrounding nations and their gods, and often enough these covenants with these foreign nations are against each other. It is a refrain throughout the First Book of the Kings, that the kings of Israel and Judah are constantly at war with one another. And as a result of all of these divisions, Israel is divided in her devotion to the LORD. Insomuch as Israel is turned against herself, insomuch as Israel exists as a divided and splintered nation, her devotion to the LORD will be divided, and even her worship of the LORD becomes an attempt at currying favor over and against the other half of the divided kingdom.

And Israel is left to wonder: are the promises that the LORD made to Abraham and to David valid? Will God establish a kingdom and a throne with one of David’s sons on it, that shall last forever? How can this be if there are already two distinct kingdoms warring against one another? How can this be if David’s lineage has already lost the throne?

In the face of this division and unfaithfulness, God raises up the prophets, who call the people of God to repent of their sins, to put away their idols and false gods, and to return to the LORD who loves them and has claimed them for himself. Elijah is just such a prophet, and perhaps the greatest of these prophets. He is raised up by the LORD precisely when the most wicked of all of the kings of Israel is on the throne: the cruel and wicked Ahab with his idolatrous wife Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel establish places of worship throughout Israel and Jerusalem, and turn the people of Israel away from the LORD. To preside over this idolatry, Jezebel establishes four hundred and fifty prophets, but not prophets of the LORD, prophets of Baal.

In the chapter before our passage, there is a dramatic confrontation between these four hundred and fifty prophets and the lone Elijah. Elijah challenges these prophets to see who is the true God. The rules of the match are given by Elijah: build an altar prepared for a burnt sacrifice. Put the wood and the sacrifice on the altar. But here’s the catch: leave the matches and the lighters and the torches and gasoline at home. For this sacrifice, Baal must bring the fire. If he is lord, as his name means and claims, and he is the one who gives the rain and brings life, surely a little bit of fire is no difficulty for him! Well, perhaps we all remember the rest. The prophets pray and dance and call on Baal, doing all that they can to get his attention. Elijah’s response to all of this is: maybe they need to call louder, perhaps their putative god is sleeping, or, perhaps Baal is using the restroom and cannot hear them! And then Elijah has an altar built, with stone and wood and sacrifice and adds water over the whole of it, so much water that they build a trench around the altar to contain it. And he prays to God, and
“the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and they said, ‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.’” (1 Kings 19:38–39, RSV)

The LORD shows himself to be the one true God, not just of Israel, but of the whole world, to whom no other putative gods ought even be compared. The four hundred and fifty prophets are shown to be the ones who were truly alone, while the lone prophet Elijah was shown to be far from alone, for the LORD was with him.

Jezebel hears of what had happened between Elijah and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and promises to kill Elijah. Elijah flees to the wilderness, and asks that the LORD would take his life from him. And, in a sense, the LORD does precisely that. Elijah twice lays down and he sleeps. But twice he is awakened by the Angel of the LORD, and twice he is given food unto life, viaticum, food for pilgrims journeying unto God. Like the people of Israel in the wilderness, and like the five thousand who were weary from listening to Jesus teach all day long, and like us gathered here and all the rest who gather around the Word and the Table, Elijah is given bread to strengthen him for the journey. And the journey set before him, which the Angel of the LORD calls him to, is a forty day journey to Horeb, the mount of God.

Horeb is the place where the LORD had given the Law to Moses and to Israel. Horeb is also the place where Moses struck the rock from which water poured forth, and of which Paul says in the First Letter to the Corinthians, “the Rock was Christ” (10:4). It was also at Horeb, that the LORD placed Moses in a “cleft” and passed before him, showing himself in his glory to Moses. It is here, on the same mountain, and likely the very same cave, that we find Elijah. Here the Word of the LORD comes to Elijah. Elijah stands on the mount and, just as with Moses, “the LORD passed by.” But when the LORD passes by, there is “a great and strong wind,” a tempest. This wind is so strong that it tears the mountains apart, rocks are shattered before this wind. But the LORD is not in this destruction, is not in the wind. Then there is a great earthquake, and then fire, but the LORD is in neither of these. Finally, there is a “still small voice,” and when Elijah hears this voice, he responds by wrapping his face in his cloak. For Elijah, like Moses before him, had the glory of the LORD pass in front of him, for the glory of the LORD was in this still small voice.

The powers of destruction the LORD was not recognized in, but in stillness and in smallness, a comforting and perhaps encouraging voice. But what shall we make of this with just the previous chapter, where it surely seems like the LORD was in the fire, when the “fire of the LORD” had come down from heaven and consumed both the sacrifice and the very altar itself, which resulted in the people exclaiming that surely “the LORD, he is God” (1 Kings 18:39)? Or, if the LORD is not in these powers of destruction, why are the four hundred and fifty prophets put to death at Elijah’s command? This still, small voice does not just give abstract encouragement or gentleness, it goes on to speak as the voice of the Word of God. Elijah is told to return to his vocation as a prophet, to anoint two kings and a successor-prophet. This same still, small voice promises,

“Him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.” (1 Kings 19:17, RSV)
How can the still, small voice of the Lord, which was not in the powers of destruction, promise so much destruction and death? How can the voice, which speaks in meekness and in stillness, bring death?

Our Psalm for this morning may be of aid to us here, and we can give thanks that the Spirit of God has guided the Church to place this Psalm to be chanted and heard alongside of our Old Testament lesson. They interpret one another, to be sure, but more importantly, the placing of texts alongside of one another gives us the opportunity to see how Jesus Christ is made known through these texts together, how these readings from the holy Word of God are fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Word Incarnate. To our Psalm: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (85:10). “Mercy and truth have met together.” God created Adam and Eve, God created all of humanity, for communion and fellowship with one another, to be sure, but ultimately for communion and fellowship with himself. God is love (1 John 4:8), and he has created us to be loved by him, and to give this same love back to him and to one another. Alas, we are unable to. Humanity, in the first Adam, is separated from God. His love for us has not ceased, but his love no longer finds someone who is capable of loving him in return. Humanity separated from God has turned in on itself, loves itself unto death. And this is precisely what God has said, to be separated from God, to live outside of the cool of the Garden where we can walk with God, is to die, to be already dead. This is the truth. The wages of sin is death, and it keeps on paying out the same reward.

God in his great mercy has given his Son to die for us, while we are yet sinners. God has given his Son to take humanity to himself in the womb of the Virgin Mary, to live a human life, and to turn humanity back to the Father in himself. That is, Jesus Christ takes humanity turned in on itself, and turns it back to God, through his life, death, resurrection and ascension. In Jesus Christ, mercy and truth have met together. Jesus is the Truth, Truth in person. Insomuch as Jesus is the perfect Image of the Father, the one who can make his Father known because he knows the Father from eternity, and is one with the Father from eternity, insomuch as this is who Jesus is, he is the Truth. But he is the Truth of God, or God the Truth, precisely as a human person. The whole of his faithful and holy life, death, resurrection and ascension is not merely doing something that we could not or would not so that we then do not have to. Rather, the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are a unified act of taking humankind, taking us, to himself, and presenting us to the Father in his own human body. In Jesus Christ, mercy and truth have met together.

This is what is prefigured in the still small voice that Elijah heard. This does not negate the fact that God had used destruction to bring about his purposes, but it shows that this is not who God is. The Lord desires mercy, for he is a God of mercy. The Lord will not abandon his covenants that he made with Abraham and with David, neither will he abandon Israel. The Lord will establish a Son on David’s throne, and his Kingdom will be forever, and all of the families of the world, including Israel, will be blessed in the one in whom mercy and truth have met.

So too, in Jesus Christ, “righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psalm 85:10b). According to St Paul in 1 Corinthians, God has made our Lord Jesus Christ to be “our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1:30). All that was lost in the First Adam not only have we regained, Jesus Christ has become that for us. He is our righteousness. So too, as St Paul says in Ephesians, has Christ become our peace: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For
he is our peace” (1:13–14a). How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring good news, who bring the Gospel, but the feet that bring good news are the feet that were pierced, that were blood covered. This is the beauty of the Gospel. For in Jesus Christ righteousness and peace have kissed each other, and this kiss is extended to us. This is precisely what is extended to us when we gather at this, the Lord’s Table or when we hear the proclamation of the Gospel. We do not, as it were, merely receive peace or righteousness, we do not merely receive wisdom from God or become righteous and sanctified. More than this, we receive Jesus Christ, who is all of this in himself and becomes these for us. Jesus Christ comes to us, clothed with all of his benefits, as it were, and we are clothed with him, just as a newly baptized person puts on a white robe.

Jesus Christ has taken the death that humankind existed in, has taken the death that was as justly ours as it was of the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and he has made it his own so that his Life might be made our own, for Christ is our life. And now he ever lives to intercede for us, including us in his own life at Holy Baptism and sustaining us in this life through the Church gathered around his table, receiving his body and blood in bread and cup. He is our Life and peace, he is our righteousness and Truth precisely because he is alive, precisely because in human flesh he lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.