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

In this evening’s story, we find that Elijah heard the voice of the *Lord* in “a still small voice.” And so we read:

Behold, the *Lord* passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the *Lord,* but the *Lord* was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the *Lord* was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the *Lord* was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle.

(1 Kings 19:11-13, RSV)

Elijah was blessed to hear the voice of the *Lord.* You and I are often blessed in this same manner.

In the *Lord*'s great mercy, this text from 1 Kings has come to us this evening. We are nearing the end of Lent, about the time when we all start wondering if Lent will last forever, if Easter will ever come. Lent is only forty days long, but forty days of penitence is hard for us. Is it too great for us? Well, I think that this is part of the point of Lent, we learn to wait patiently for the movement between the seasons of the church year, for Lent to give birth to Easter. So too we learn to wait patiently upon the Lord, for his work to take shape amongst us and within us, and finally we wait for the day when we shall all be gathered together on the great Mountain of God.

Elijah in our reading also has a great journey set before him. Elijah has just come from a great showdown with 450 prophets of a false god. God revealed the falsehood and powerlessness of the prophets of Baal and showed himself to be the one true God. But now, immediately after this, we do not see Elijah triumphing over his enemies, emboldened by God’s might to go on serving him. We might expect to see Elijah being crowned king of Israel, but instead, we see Elijah fleeing. Elijah has seen the power of God, the fire of God come down from heaven, and yet he is still afraid of the threats of just one wicked queen. Elijah leaves the promised land, and with great sorrow goes back out into the wilderness and asks the *Lord* to take away his life. But even in the midst of his fear, even in Elijah’s fleeing, God does not abandon him; the *Lord* comes to Elijah in his despair unto death, and feeds him. “And behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, ‘Arise and eat’” (1 Kings 19:5, RSV). And Elijah is given a humble loaf of bread and some water. Again he falls asleep, and is awakened by the angel. This time the angel says, “arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you” (v. 7). And in a sort of pre-enactment of the forty days of temptation that Jesus endured in the wilderness, Elijah eats and drinks the humble bread and water, and goes in the “strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God” (v. 8). Elijah is called to what surely seems to
be an impossible task, but the LORD gives him humble food that surely does what no merely ordinary food could do, and he is sustained through the forty days and nights until he reaches the holy mount of God.

And when he arrives at the mount of God, the word of the LORD tells him to go up onto the mountain, so that the LORD could pass before him. And there arises a great and terrible wind, destroying all that is in its path, breaking apart the rocks and splitting the very mountains themselves. But this was not the LORD passing by. And then there comes a great and impressive earthquake, but this was not the LORD passing by either. And after the earthquake, there is a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire either. The LORD is not in any of these forces of destruction; the LORD is not in these great impressive powers. Finally, after all of these, Elijah hears a still, small voice, a humble voice. And after hearing this humble little voice, Elijah covers his face, he wraps it in his cloak, and goes out from the cleft of the rock. In the hearing of this humble voice, Elijah has recognized the glory of the LORD. The glory of the LORD was not the overwhelming forces of wind that could destroy mountains, or earthquakes or fire; Elijah perceived the glory of the LORD in a humble voice. The same glory that was seen by Peter and James and John when Jesus was Transfigured on the mountain, and the same glory that blinded the church-persecuting Saul on the road to Damascus, Elijah saw when he heard the humble voice of the LORD.

I already said earlier that this story of Elijah is a sort of pre-enactment of Jesus’ faithful enduring of forty days of temptation in the wilderness. And we are now in a similar situation, the forty days of Lent. The forty days of Lent are, for the Church, a sort of re-enactment of Jesus’ endurance in the wilderness. As Elijah was sustained through his seemingly impossible forty day journey, so too was Jesus sustained through forty days of fasting and temptation, and so too are we sustained through seasons of penitence like Lent. Like Elijah who was given humble food for the journey, so too are we given simple and humble food for our journey. For us too, the journey of repentance is too great for us, so we should arise and eat. For Elijah, this humble bread had a promise of God attached to it: without this bread the journey would be too much, but with this humble bread he would indeed arrive at the mount of God. With the promise of God, this bread was no longer merely ordinary bread, but gave strength to endure. We too are sustained in this season of repentance, even when it seems as if the journey is far too much for us. On our own, it is too much for us. But our Lord has not left us alone, he has not left us to repent on our own, he has given us food for the journey, food that comes with the promise of God. We are given what surely looks like mere bread and wine. What could be more humble than a crumb of bread and sip of wine? And yet, our Lord has promised that this will be the food that sustains us in our journey to the holy Mountain of God. To our eyes it might look as unlikely that this bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ as the humble loaf of bread and water looked to be sufficient food for a forty days’ journey. And yet, Elijah was sustained, and we too are promised that this food shall be for us the body and blood of the Lord, shall be a foretaste of the feast to come, shall bring us into Christ’s very own life. He has promised that we will not be left alone in anything, not least in our attempts at repentance.

Each of the seasons of the church year are different ways of understanding and embodying the whole of the Christian life, from Baptism until death. We could say that they are different but necessary ways of enacting Christ’s life throughout the whole of our lives; the seasons are the various ways that we struggle with all that Scripture calls us to be and then to
do. So Easter is not showing that seven weeks of the year we celebrate and remember Christ’s resurrection, but that the whole of our lives we celebrate Christ’s resurrection. So too with Lent. The very first sentence of the Reformation, the first of Luther’s 95 theses, said, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,” he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ Lent is a season of repentance teaching us that the whole of our lives is to be shaped and constituted by repentance. This doesn’t mean that we are despondent and in despair, it means that our lives are constantly shaped and formed by turning away from sin and temptation and turning to Jesus Christ. In this sense, even our celebrations and our joy can be repentance, turning away from the false joys we fancifully imagine sin will bring to the real and true joys of life in and with Christ and with one another.

Lent then is teaching us a necessary facet of enacting Christ’s life as his Body, the Church: that is repentance, turning to Jesus and away from all things that keep us from him. And so the Christian life is a movement toward Easter resurrection, where Jesus’ resurrection is made manifest in the whole world and in each person in it. The story of Elijah shows forth the end of this journey, the journey that we are all on together with Jesus. Elijah was called up onto the great Mountain of God, and there he heard the still, small voice of God, and was overcome with God’s glory. Our journey with Jesus will end in a vision of God’s glory, will end in seeing Jesus face to face, when we shall be made like him, able to see him as he is with no veil to separate us.

But until that day, we are given a foretaste of this as well. We too hear the voice of God coming to us in humility and quietness. When someone comes up to the lectern and reads from the Holy Word of God, there is no great tempest that shatters rocks and breaks apart the mountains, there is no earthquake or fire that comes raining down with it. The voice of God yet comes to us in humility, in the still, small voice of the one who reads God’s word. This is true too in all of the ways that the Word of God is given between the people of God. One of Luther’s defining marks of the Church was what he called the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters of Christ.”² This is one of the forms that the word of God takes in Church, one of the ways that Jesus Christ is alive in his Church. This is where the comfort and exhortation of Jesus himself is given, not just by a pastor or priest, but by every member of Christ’s body, the church. This is the small word of encouragement given from one brother to another, the gentle pointing to Jesus and his life from one sister to another when we have gone astray. This is the gentle word of sympathy in face of death and loss; this is the strengthening word in the face of despair.

I got to see this first hand at the funeral of Al Quirong, now of blessed memory. I was sitting in the chancel before the service, and one by one I saw people from our congregation come up and say something to Vi. I do not know what they said, I was not close enough, and perhaps those people do not remember what they said either, or even that they did it. But I nearly wept when I saw this, for I knew that this was Jesus himself comforting Vi in her grief, this was Jesus himself coming to Vi through the mouth and lips of her brothers and sisters. The


Word of God humbled himself to take on flesh, and the word of God humbles himself still to speak through human voices; as Holy Scripture says, “the Word [of God] is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (Deuteronomy 30:14; Romans 10:8). The Word of God humbled himself to take human flesh from the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, yet humbles himself by taking our tongues as his own, by taking shape in our mouths in a similar way to when he took shape in the womb of the Virgin. The Word of God humbles himself to speak to us, when his word is read, when his word is preached, and when we speak his words to one another.

And so the glory of God is precisely this, that he humbles himself to be the very food for our journey, and speaks to us all along the way in the humility of our own small voices. Even in the midst of the clamoring of our loud world, God has willed that he be heard, and he uses us, the members of the Church, to speak that his voice might be heard. And God has willed that we be sustained in this clamoring world, and so he says to us this evening, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” But with this Word comes his promise, that through the humble food of bread and wine, and through our speaking the Word of God to one another, by coming to hear his word read, through hearing his word preached, we again are sustained in our life of repentance, until we shall gather together on that Holy Mountain of God and see Jesus face to face, when repentance shall be no more, and all faith shall be turned into sight, when we will see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.