

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

1 Kings 18:16-45

The LORD is God

How does an idol take hold of you? Like cancer. It starts with a few cells and slowly spreads, sometimes so slowly it isn't detected for years. But once it's taken hold, once it's spread far enough, it has complete control of you, and getting rid of it is a long and painful process.

Israel didn't fall into idolatry overnight. Israel didn't even fall into idolatry over a year. It was a long process. Little by little false religion took hold. One seemingly harmless and inconsequential compromise after another led to debilitating changes, as they slowly went from the LORD is God to the LORD is a god, and there is a big difference. If the LORD is just one of many, a choice at the religious buffet, He's not the LORD at all. No Christian should say, "Your god works for you. Jesus works for me." Those who say such things have a tenuous and slipping grasp, if any hold at all, on the Jesus who promises in our Holy Gospel, "**I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,**" not a way, a truth, a life.

The Pope has been in the States lately. If you didn't know, to paraphrase the Emmaus disciples' query of the unrecognized Christ, "Where have you been?" Perhaps you've read or watched some of the coverage. It's the same story rewritten a thousand times. The Pope is here. Roman Catholics are excited. A lot of them disagree with him. They still consider themselves good Roman Catholics, however. And you just want to shout at the top of your lungs, "No, they're not good Roman Catholics then." Theirs is not one opinion among equals, because you can't be a good Roman Catholic and disagree with the Pope, at least not when he's spoken officially. That's what the Reformation was about, remember? The buck has to stop somewhere. Roman Catholicism said it stopped with the Pope, Luther with the Scriptures, because popes and councils could err. The popes said no. Luther said, "See, I told you they could err." Now me personally, I kind of like the bad Roman Catholics. We make the best Lutherans. But that's not my point.

I'm not picking on Roman Catholicism today, however. I want to illustrate a point. Notice the shift in thinking such coverage betrays. One can be something without believing what it means to be that. One can call himself something without accepting the definitions for what that thing is. And so we also hear about so-called Lutherans doing all sorts of crazy things that neither the Scriptures teach nor the Lutheran Confessions confess. It's sheer nonsense, but it's popular thought, and, I dare say it may at times creep into our thinking.

The LORD is God or He isn't. Holy Scripture is Holy Scripture or isn't. Christian is as Christian does. Lutheran Christian is as Lutheran Christian does. Words mean things or they don't. Truths are true or they're not. Ever time I hear someone say, "Well, for me..." and then proceed to speak about an absolute truth, something revealed by God Almighty or proven by sound reason, I just want to bang my head against the wall. I just want to say, "Well, for me, I'm a seven-foot tall millionaire from the moon." Truth is truth, whether people accept it or not. God is God, whether people believe it or not. Just as sure as you have two ears for hearing and a backside for sitting in the pews, God has a message, and that message is not all that unclear or confusing: "**The LORD is God.**" And that means everything else that claims to be God, or that we treat like God, all that is nothing, nonsense, a fast track to disappointment.

What do we have before us in the first lesson today? We have a bunch of Jews gathered for worship. No doubt, they considered themselves good Jews. No doubt, they

thought the LORD was God. But was Baal God too? They weren't too sure. The situation was as awkward as a Lutheran with a tambourine. It wasn't pretty.

Baal worship came from the Canaanites. God had told Israel to cut them off when they entered the Promised Land, to have no relationship with them, but, well, their beer was strong and their women were loose, and so over time they got friendly together. And with that came all manner of depravity and false worship. Who'd a thunk? I guess God either knows what He's talking about or He doesn't. Thank God we've always realized that and lived like it. Thank God we've never let a little strong beer or loose women—be they whatever temptation that might be—draw us in and away from Him.

The priests of Baal went to work when Elijah challenged them. Surely such a powerful god wouldn't let them down. I mean, its not like our 401K might not be there when we need it, or the internet fail to give us the big answers in a crunch, or the television or a bottle or a pill fail to keep us happy, or our car or house keep us content. Oops, back to the text. The priests of Baal went to work. And nothing happened. So they called louder. And nothing happened. So they cut themselves. And nothing happened. This was a spiritual stock market crash. And all the while Elijah mocked them. **“Cry aloud, for he is god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”** To be fair, they mocked our God once too when His Father seemed to be doing nothing for Him, they even cut Him and put Him to death, but He did rise three days later. Baal just stayed dead, as he always will.

What a high point this must have been for Elijah. His ministry had brought him nothing but hardship. No home, few willing to listen, derision, hatred, and the looming threat of death. Baal's priests and worshippers flourished under King Ahab. They had it all. They were respected, rewarded, and revered. Elijah had his remnant. They had the masses.

But when rubber hit road, when the cow pies hit the fan, they ended up wailing and cutting themselves, and to no end. They were revealed for what they were, as will all who abandon or oppose the LORD and His remnant and His will. When will that time come? That's what keeps us honest. It's not for us to know. All we need to know is this: **“the LORD is God,”** and He's not just any God, but the God who died for us on the cross, the sacrifice acceptable to God, as was Elijah's, to bring us with Him to eternal joy in the resurrection.

Sin seems worth it for a while. It even seems right at times, seems pious and spiritual. But it always hurts, always does harm, always cuts, just like the swords and lances of the priests of Baal. And some of those cuts don't scab easily, and the devil loves nothing more than to throw salt in them, to make you lose sight of Christ in the pain. But God wants no one pierced but His Son, once for all, as an offering for sin. So why should we continue drawing our own blood when we can find healing in His?

So here we are. A bunch of Lutherans gathered to worship the LORD who is God. No doubt, we consider ourselves good Lutherans, at least better than those down the street. But are we? Sure, **“the LORD is God,”** but is everything else thus not God in our lives? That might not have been the case when we walked in, but it sure can be when we leave. We may not be many—neither was the remnant. We may not be perfect—neither was Elijah. But we have seen the sacrifice acceptable to God. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The LORD is God. We are forgiven. By His wounds we are healed of our self-inflicted sin. The LORD is God: your God. And good Lutherans are not the one's who've never forgotten that, who have no scars to show; no, good Lutherans are those who believe that is precisely why God became man, why words mean things, truth is truth, and anything else is just a fast track to disappointment. Amen.