How long does it take you to go from the heights of happiness to the depths of despair? Not very long, does it? The prophet Elijah once made this mood-busting plunge in a matter of seconds. You see he had been riding high on a wave of victory. At God's command he had challenged, defeated, and then executed more than 400 false prophets after a day-long contest that left many in Israel cheering: The Lord – he is God! That same day Elijah announced that God would end a 3 year drought and it happened, again proving the Lord to be the only true God and showing Elijah to be his bold and honest spokesman. Energized by these events and empowered by the Spirit of God, Elijah then ran 20 miles from Mt Carmel to Jezreel.

Talk about being in a great mood! Elijah was sure that King Ahab would now give up his idol worship and order all of Israel to do the same. But that feeling quickly disappeared when Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel, sent Elijah the following memo: May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of the prophets you killed.

In a flash, Elijah's mood and his life were turned upside down. All he could think to do was to run away and pray that God would end his life before Jezebel did. But God had other plans in mind for Elijah, plans that he shares with us, because what God has to say in the verses of our text is meant not only to lift up Elijah, but every one of us as well. This is the great truth of Scripture that can brighten all our days: GOD IS IN CONTROL! See how he carries out his justice; look how he works through his Word; and consider how he provides for his church.

With the opening verse of our text, we join in progress a conversation between a downhearted Elijah and his boss, the Lord God. Elijah has fled more than 200 miles to escape Queen Jezebel's murderous threat. He has come all the way to Mt Horeb, expecting that God might validate his anger towards Israel with a little divine fury of his own. For a moment it must have seemed as if that would happen. From his mountain-top hideout Elijah witnessed a powerful wind, a violent earthquake, and finally a scorching fire. Elijah probably thought these were all types of the judgment God was about to inflict upon a people who had treated his servant so shamefully. But only for a minute because the Bible is quick to add that the Lord was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. There was no booming, angry voice of judgment in any of those displays of power. Instead the Lord spoke on that mountain in the soft, gentle tones of a whisper. Rather than blasting away at Israel, the Lord quietly asked: What are you doing here, Elijah?

Twice the Lord asked that question and twice Elijah replied: I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life. There is a tone of self-pity in Elijah's words to which every one of us sinners can relate. We feel sorry for ourselves when the world around us holds a view of life that differs from our own and they ridicule us for our backward beliefs. Like Elijah, we have fled the anger of those who despise God's will. We avoid like the plague conversations about abortion and same-sex marriages. We offer no comment to co-workers or family members who expect us to regard their live-in relationships as a normal, acceptable way of life. We choose to say nothing when our married friends announce that they are getting divorced for no other reason than they have lost interest in each other. We know what God says about all of these sins, but rather than speak on his behalf, we remain silent.

That is how Elijah felt. But there was more than self-pity behind his complaint, as we gather from God's reply. Elijah was really blaming God for his problems. After all, it was God's covenant and God's altars that were being destroyed; it was his prophets who were being killed. Wasn't it time for God to deal out a little fire and brimstone?
Who of us has not felt the same way? Rather than speak up for God’s truth, rather than point out sin when we see it, it is so much easier to sit back and wait for God to do something about it. Why doesn’t God step in and teach our sinful world a lesson it will not soon forget? Why does he permit all this sin to go on around us? Doesn’t he care? Isn't he in charge? Can't he do something about it?

God addresses Elijah's complaints and ours in reading. God had work for Elijah to do. He sends him back to Israel to anoint three men to positions of leadership within the government and the church, men whom God would use to condemn and punish sinners. Contrary to Elijah's opinion, contrary to our own bitter complaints, God is in control! He carries out his justice - not on our timetable - but on his own. He carries out this justice, not in a spirit of revenge as we would have it, but with saving love in mind, so that even as he punishes there may be some who seek God's mercy and live.

Isn't it shameful how quickly we want God to strike others with the punishment he has spared us? Isn't it frightening to realize that if God were to deal with sinners in the way we want him to, we would have to be the first in line to feel his wrath? Why, we better than anyone else know his will and still we ignore it. We do not love God above all things; we do not regard his Word as holy; we do not learn it as we should and we do not speak its truth in love. Rather than fearing our God, we complain about him and his seeming lack of interest in us and our world.

It is not only shameful, these sins are damning. Each and every one of them earns us the punishment of hell. That would certainly be our fate if not for the fact that God is in control. The loving God of heaven carries out his justice in a way that satisfies his wrath and still declares us innocent, again, according to his timetable. When the time was exactly right, God sent his Son to this world to meet his law's demands for us. Jesus loved God, he loved all our friends, he loved all our enemies, he loved our whole world perfectly, not just as an example for us to follow, but more importantly, he did all this as our substitute. His perfect love now counts as ours in the sight of God. We get the credit for what that perfect love accomplished and we get the benefit of what that perfect love endured. In love, Jesus also took ownership of our rebellion and of our lack of love for God and each other. On the cross God charged Jesus with our every sin - with the sin of all people. God carried out his justice by turning his anger against his own Son until the sum total of the humanity's sin was fully punished in Christ. Jesus' death is our sin-payment. His resurrection is our receipt, proving that God's justice has been served once and for all.

Knowing that God did this for all people, doesn't that change our attitude toward our fellow sinners? Rather than waiting for an angry God to strike them dead, aren't we moved by the grace of God to deal with others as God is dealing with us? Fire and brimstone will not do the job. God has a better way of winning over his enemies as he reminded Elijah, telling him: I have preserved in Israel seven thousand whose knees have not bent to Baal and whose lips have not kissed him. This news should not have surprised the prophet. God is in control - he works through his Word – a Word that is living and active. Elijah was not to keep hiding in a cave. He was to go back the way he came and preach the Word, assured that it was accomplishing great things whether Elijah realized it or not. He was not alone. The gospel that had made him a member of God's family had done the same thing for thousands of other souls.

What an encouragement to us! God has given us the same Word. Just look at what it can do! We do not want to shy away from conversations about God’s will for the sinners we know and meet. We want to speak God's law to them, for it has power like nothing else to show these people their sins and their desperate need for a Savior - the very Savior that God has
given them in Jesus. What a privilege to speak the saving name of Jesus to sinners who have been crushed by the curse of God's law. What a joy to tell them that Jesus has lived and died, and now lives again to make them right with God. Think of it, you have been commissioned by Lord himself to announce his forgiveness and to proclaim that the doors of his heaven are open to your family, friends and neighbors. Like Elijah, you may be surprised to learn what God is accomplishing through your witness. Some day you will it all see for yourself.

Until then, remember this: God is in control - he provides for his church. We become discouraged only when we doubt that God is for us. But why? The very Savior who has already rescued us from sin, the very Savior who has given us his gospel to enjoy and to share, is the same Savior who has promised that the gates of Hades will not overcome his church. Elijah had become tired and weary. God assured him that his labor had not been in vain.

But that is not all the Lord did. He told Elijah to anoint his own successor, a young, wealthy farmer by the name of Elisha. As our reading closes, we see that Elijah extended God's call in a rather unique way. He took his own cloak, the symbol of his prophetic office and threw it on Elisha's shoulders. The young man understood immediately that he was being called to serve. He wanted permission to say good-by to his family. Elijah responded: Go back. For what have I done to you?

Elisha was not being forced to serve. God does not draft soldiers. His army consists of volunteers. It is not the threat of punishment that motivates. It is the love of Christ that compels those who know the Savior to willingly serve him and to gratefully share him with others. Look at the effect that love had on Elisha. He returned to his home only long enough to slaughter his oxen and burn his plows. He would have no need of them ever again. From this point on he would be farming the kingdom of God, sowing the seeds of the gospel in place of Elijah and all the prophets who had gone before him.

And to this day God has been providing his church with workers: pastors, teachers and lay people who are compelled by Christ's love to serve the Lord and his kingdom. That is not going to change. No matter how terrible things get, no matter how evil this world becomes, the church will stand. Particular branches of Christianity may come and go, but the church will always be here and it will always be served by believers who are made bold by God's love to speak God's truth. And as they speak, some will hear the gospel and believe it, for God promises that his Word will not return to him empty.

With such promises in place, we have nothing to fear. Though from time to time our weak faith may fail us and we might become discouraged, we have the cure for all that troubles us right here in Holy Scripture. For here is a truth that will strengthen our faith and overcome our doubts: God is in control. He carries out his justice; he works through his Word; and he will provide for his church until all its members are home with him, safe and sound, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill