

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost; October 29, 2023
+ John 4:46-53 +
“What God Ordains is Always Good for Faith”

Jesus again came to Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine.

In Capernaum, there was a certain royal official whose son was sick. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea into Galilee, he went to him and begged him to come down and heal his son, because his son was about to die.

Jesus told him, “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you certainly will not believe.”

The royal official said to him, “Lord, come down before my little boy dies.”

“Go,” Jesus told him, “your son is going to live.”

The man believed this word that Jesus spoke to him and left.

Already as he was going down, his servants met him with the news that his boy was going to live. So he asked them what time his son got better. They told him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” Then the father realized that was the exact time when Jesus had told him, “Your son is going to live.” And he himself and his whole household believed.

Today we are singing and hearing very good hymns. Some hymns are better than others, and what makes them good is more than their tune or memorability. The best hymns confess God’s goodness as revealed in Christ Jesus. There is a hymn like that that I would have picked to sing today if I picked hymns at the same time I wrote sermons. Because we’re not singing it, you’ll just hear some of the best lines. This hymn, “What God Ordains Is Always Good,” confesses that nothing in this life happens apart from God’s eternal will and that God’s will for your life is that you live in blessed communion with him here on earth, and finally in heaven. Believing this, Samuel Rodigast confessed in the original version of his hymn, “*His hand that brings me sadness Will turn my tears to gladness;*” and that, “*There is no poison in the cup That my Physician sends me;*” and though, “*I may know both joy and woe, Someday I shall see clearly, That He hath loved me dearly.*” This is a bold confession that comes from a strong faith.

That the nobleman in today’s Gospel had faith is not in question. He would not have travelled to Jesus and begged him to heal his dying son had he not believed that he who once changed water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana could help him, too. But unlike that of the hymn writer, his was a weak faith, a faith that required that Jesus to come down to his house, so that he could see

him perform this miracle. Jesus desires faith that is bold and complete, that boldly confesses God will always do what is good and believes this without requiring sight or proof.

Jesus didn't need to come down. He already had come down, from heaven, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. Yet at the same time he is fully God. So he speaks, and it is. Christian faith believes this, and so faith is, as the writer to the Hebrews declared, "The evidence of things not seen."

But faith is constantly under attack, and by some very powerful enemies too. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood," the Apostle Paul explained, "but against the authorities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places." The sin inside us, the devil and the unbelieving world around us always scream, "Don't be a sucker. If you don't see it, it's not real. Reasonable people need proof, no matter who is speaking." And this lie quickly and fiercely attacks, because we live in a world full of scammers, charlatans, and snake oil salesmen. Our experience, along with our spiritual enemies, pull us into treating God himself by the same empirical standards we apply to imperfect people. And so, like the royal official, we have faith. But not the perfect faith God desires. It is this weakness Jesus rebukes when he says, "**Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will certainly not believe.**" He is not accusing the official or anyone else in Cana of complete unbelief, only of a faith that still clings to sight.

We can take some comfort in the fact that no sinner's faith is perfect, and even greater comfort in the fact that God does not give up on those with faith that still calls for proof. And so we see not just this nobleman struggle, but also the disciples, who, when caught in a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee, did not trust in the Lord who happened to be sleeping in the stern of the boat at the time. Instead they were convinced they were going to perish. And rather than trust that the Lord God, who had promised their Father Abraham on oath to give them the land of Canaan as their inheritance, the children of Israel, when they heard the report of how powerful the Canaanite tribes were, plotted to kill Moses and return to bondage in Egypt. But Jesus stayed with those disciples and kept speaking to them. The Lord remained faithful to Israel, and the Promised Land was theirs in the end.

And likewise, Jesus does not turn away from this official with a dying son. He rebukes him because the official needs to understand the terrible consequences of a faith that lands not on God's own words alone, but also requires vision. Jesus did this not in anger, but in love to show him that his weak faith needed to be strengthened if it was to stand against the wiles of God's lying enemies.

And we hear this rebuke of our own faith and take it with the love and concern it is intended. If there is any part you that doubts God's promises, you need loving rebuke. And you also need to see Jesus stay with you and hear the words that will make your faith stronger.

And strengthen the man's faith Jesus did. **"Go," Jesus told him, "Your son is going to live."** Now convinced that what Jesus promised would come to pass, he went home without Jesus, thus proving what St. Paul says: **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.**

From all this, you can see for yourself that what God ordains is always good. The sickness that he ordained to come upon his son caused this nobleman great distress, and understandably so. I'm sure you would feel the same way, too. But as great as his distress was, it moved him to deny himself and drove him to Christ, who not only healed his son, but also strengthened his faith to secure his salvation. In the end: **And he himself and his whole household believed.** What God speaks, happens. His faith was now more perfect.

Dear Christian, this same grace God now shows you in your life. He allows adversity to come upon you as well, not to punish you for your sins. That is the devil's lie to get you to walk away from a loving God. What God ordains is always good, even when it's woe and sadness, because he uses such things to get you to deny yourself and to call upon him in faith; and when he speaks his words to you, your faith will be more complete.

And here is the heart of his message: At one time God's Son was also at the point of death. But there was no healing for him, there was no help at all from God because he was suffering the punishment of your sin: imperfect faith and all the rest. So great was this affliction, so severe his wounds, that he did die. He suffered physical death and the torment of hell, without help. And through his death, because it was the death of God's own Son, he atoned for your sin, making you at one with a loving God who only tells the truth, who speaks, and it happens.

But God's own Son did not stay dead. The report the nobleman's servants gave to him on the way home concerning his son previews the message the angel spoke on Easter Day concerning God's Son: "Jesus lives!" He who died has taken his life up again that all who believe in him will live, even though they die." What God says, happens. Jesus lives, and so do you, even when you die.

But what if, when adversity all the way up to death arrives, I cannot believe that what God ordains is always good? How could I trust in him to deliver me from every evil attack and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom? I couldn't, and neither could you, and God knows this, which is why he uses the adversities he allows to come into your life to strengthen your faith, even as he did this nobleman's faith. It's so that you will be able to stand in faith to the end on his words alone, believing that life will be yours, too, perfect life without end. Amen.