

Good Troublers

I Kings 18:17-18; 19:1-13, 19; II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (July 13), 2025

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Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.

-Congressman John Lewis

There's an old joke about a famous preacher who was a bit of a fraud, because his sermons were great, but no one ever realized that they'd all been written by his assistant. Finally, the assistant's patience ran out, and one day the preacher was speaking to a congregation in the thousands and at the bottom of the first page, he read the inspiring words, "And this, my friends, takes us to the very heart of the book of Habakkuk, which is..." only to turn the page and see nothing but the words, "You're on your own now."

From what I can tell many of you are beginning to feel the anxiety that the day is coming when "you're on your own now." Please remember the most frequent admonition in the entire Bible is "Fear not."

It also makes me wonder if young Elisha felt "you're on your own now," as his mentor, the older prophet Elijah goes to heaven and leaves Elisha nothing but his mantle, sort of an outer robe.

Elijah goes to heaven in about as spectacular and dramatic way that anyone could imagine. A chariot of fire with fiery horses comes down, and then there is a windstorm as he is carried away to heaven, tossing down his mantle to young

Elisha, as he goes out of sight. Talk about an exit! I would say that this is about as strong a vindication of your prophetic ministry that anyone in the entire Bible receives. And if anyone needed vindication of their ministry, it was Elijah. From the beginning he is in conflict with the king and queen, the Powers-that-Be, old Ahab and Jezebel.

And these were not your run-of-the-mill king and queen. In the Bible, these are among the very worst of the worst. The Bible introduces us to Ahab saying, he “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.” Then continues to say, “and if that was not bad enough, he married Jezebel, and went and worshiped Baal. ... Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him” (I Kings 17:30-33).

Let me make an aside. Baal was a Canaanite fertility god, who supposedly ruled over agriculture and rain. In our modern terms, worshipping Baal had to do with worshipping a thriving economy and making money for the royal elite. Common people – shepherds and farmers – were just trying to get by. If any of this sounds familiar, it should.

The first we hear of Elijah, he walks up to Ahab at the palace and confronts the king telling him that since he worships the false god of Baal, and does evil against God, there will be a great drought. In other words, your worshipping the false god Baal is going to result in economic depression and hardship.

Meanwhile, God sends Elijah out into the wilderness beyond the power and reach of Ahab and beyond Ahab’s economy to learn to rely on God’s economy. Ravens feed him and he gets water from a nearby creek. Eventually, Elijah is sent to a widow who is not even an Israelite, to be fed.

After three years of drought, God sends Elijah back to Ahab, and as soon as Elijah walks into the room, Ahab says, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” (I Kings 18:17). Elijah is not so much the troubler of Israel as he is the troubler of Ahab and Jezebel. He troubles them because he speaks the word of the Lord to them. Elijah is constantly reminding the king and queen that they are sinners, who worship the false god, Baal, while they exploit people who are poor. And in the Bible, most always, idol worship and exploitation of the poor go together.

In I Kings 18, in one of the most dramatic confrontations in the Bible – everything about Elijah is dramatic – Elijah calls down fire from heaven upon the statues of Baal and the false prophets in a big contest. He utterly defeats them and disses them. As a result, Jezebel sends word directly to Elijah, “I’m telling you up front I’m coming for you. I already have you under surveillance. We’re tracking your cell phone, listening to every word you say and tracking every move you make. We know where you live. We will send our secret police in their masks and get you.”

So, Elijah takes off on the run as far away as he could get from Jezebel. He is afraid; he is exhausted, and he is exhausted from anxiety and fear. He’s angry that though he thought he had defeated the false prophets, but they are not going to go away so easy. As Tolkien said, “The shadow always returns.” Elijah is angry that Jezebel didn’t stay defeated, and very likely he’s mad that God didn’t finish the job and destroy Ahab and Jezebel.

Elijah is also depressed not because he was a failure nor because he was weak. Sometimes depression comes when the systems we’re in and which we care about are sick. This is what happens when otherwise healthy and strong people are put in sick institutions, sick families, sick circumstances, in a sick world. Walker

Percy said, “[Is] the Self . . . Depressed because there is something wrong with it or [is] Depression a Normal Response to a Deranged World?” (*Lost in the Cosmos*, p. 73). In other words, the world is depressing! If we’re not depressed something is wrong with us! When we care about things that matter, then we are a walking-talking candidate for Depression.

So, Elijah runs and runs. And finally gets far enough away from the centers of power which puts him closer to God, that he is able to rest. He sleeps and he eats, and he prays. He sleeps and eats some more and the angel, who has been caring for him, wakes him a second time. “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” “Journey?” says Elijah, “Where am I going now?”

But this time, there is a difference. Before Elijah was trying to escape something. Now the angel of God calls him to leave here to meet something. You were driven. Now be drawn. You were a fugitive. Now be a pilgrim. Go to God.

So, Elijah gets up and journeys forty days and forty nights to the holiest place on earth that he knows about; to the one place he believes where God will be. Here the story says he went to Mt. Horeb; elsewhere in the Bible it is called Mt. Sinai. Do you remember Sinai? Horeb or Sinai, it is the same mountain on which God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and made a covenant with the People of God. Elijah returns to the place where he knew that God was most assuredly present.

He gets up on the mountain and finds a good, dark, and safe, cave into which he crawls and sleeps though the night. This cave, sort of a womb with a view, is a place where Jezebel can’t find him and where he is in God’s presence. The next morning God speaks. But instead of an answer or some sort of reassurance, God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Let me ask you something. When you find yourself in dire straits, hanging on by your fingernails, where would you go to find holy ground? What would you do to find God again? What would be your cave?

And God asks, “What are you doing here?” Are you here looking for inspirational feeling? Do you want a quick fix? What are you doing here?

Elijah says, “God, everyone and everything is going to hell in a hand basket. No one but me keeps your covenant anymore. No one but me is faithful. No one but me stands by you. Not only is everyone else unfaithful to you; they are trying to kill me too.” Elijah pours it out. Pours out the poison; pours out the toxins to God.

God says, “Go stand at the mouth of the cave.” And Elijah does so. In no time, he has to hold on and protect his face because the wind blows, the earth shakes, and then there is blazing fire! – just like when Moses was up here all of those years ago. But Elijah realizes God is not present in the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire. C. S. Lewis said that the one prayer God is likely never to answer is the prayer that says, “Encore!” (*Letters to Malcom*, p. 27).

After the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire, then there was sheer silence. The King James Version said there was a still, small voice, but it is best translated as silence. Nothing. No noise. The wind dies down; nothing. And Elijah listens. He lives into, steps into the silence; allows his heart rate to slow down, his breathing slows; he relaxes, and he listens. He breathes a long exhale. He becomes quiet.

Notice he does not check his phone and look at social media. He sits. He listens. The kind of sitting and being silent and listening that comes from lots of practice, practice, practice.

But Elijah is not passive. This is a silence and stillness, a waiting on God, so we can face the challenges and the darkness, in front of us. It's what theologian Dorothee Solle called "revolutionary patience." What poet Adrienne Rich called "a wild patience."

Elijah was able to be quiet. To listen. Back in Exodus 19 God came to Moses at this very same place in whirlwind and fire and in an earthquake. This time, God comes in silence. God does not always come to us as we expect. And God comes in new ways. It's the old tradition but God's newness, all at the same time.

Elijah listens and God listens and then God gives him some challenging words. They are words of enormous risk and great danger. Elijah, who came seeking safety; learns revolutionary patience and then is sent out on risky, subversive mission. God says there's a good chance that what you're going to do will get you in trouble, but it will be good trouble, because it is gospel trouble. The trouble caused by working for goodness and mercy, for justice, and peace. I'm going to send you back to where you earn your nickname, "Troubler of Israel."

As John Lewis used to say: *Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.*

Are you ready for the struggle of a lifetime? If you're not, if you want a satisfied complacency, a place to get spiritual but not get involved, then this is not the place for you. This is a place, a people, a church that is going to get you in good trouble, necessary trouble, gospel trouble.

So, God tells him to anoint someone else as king – in other words, the days of Ahab and Jezebel are numbered. Furthermore, you need to get some help, so go call Elisha to be your prophet-in-training so he might take over for you eventually. And God tells him one more thing: “Hey, and by the way, you’re not the only faithful one. There are 7,000 who have not bent their knee to Baal.” Now go back to them. Get out of yourself and join the God Movement, Elijah, and quit trying to “Lone Ranger” it.

God reminds him that he is called to a purpose bigger than himself, and part of that is calling him back to community by telling him he is not alone and that he is called to train and mentor young Elisha by getting him involved, too.

Congressman John Lewis, who was arrested 45 times in his life, used to say that you must lean into the darkness, lean into the injustice. You don’t turn away; you lean in. So, Lewis rode desegregated buses on Freedom Rides right into the belly of the racist beast of the Deep South. At Selma, Lewis walked right into the charging police on horseback and in riot gear. Fifty years later, Lewis remembered, “I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. My legs went out from under me. I thought I saw death. I thought I was going to die.” TV stations broadcast the violent footage around the country that Bloody Sunday on March 7, 1965. There was such shock across America, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act later that year.

In Luke 9, in the pivot point of Luke, it says that Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. He leaned in and went straight into the belly of the beast. He leaned and was arrested and crucified. He leaned in and was resurrected.

Jesus leaned in and John Lewis leaned in. Part of what we do here is teach you how to lean in.

Elijah gets up and directly goes to young Elisha, who is out plowing on the farm, and Elijah takes his own mantle, his cloak, and wraps it around Elisha, and after a big barbecue and send off, young Elisha follows old Elijah and learns and practices, practices, practices what Elijah teaches him.

How long did it take? We don't know. This is slow work that might take months, but more likely several years. Eventually, Elijah knows Elisha is ready to take over. Elisha has been apprenticing to the one who walks with God, to one who knows God. And now, it is time.

Elijah says to Elisha, "Look, you stay here. God is telling me I have further to go." And Elisha says, "I will not leave you." Three times this is repeated. The two of them come to the Jordan River and Elijah takes his mantle and strikes the water, and the river backs up just like Moses a long time before. The two of them are able to cross over on dry ground. And still Elisha will not let him go.

Elijah realizes why the young man won't let him go: because there is something this disciple still needs from the master. "What do you need from me?"

Young Elisha says, "I want to be devoted to God, like you. I want to be a person whose whole life is shaped and guided by faith. I have been your disciple; now, my father, give me your legacy. Share with me the spirit of God that I see in you. You are more practiced in God than I am. I want to keep learning."

They keep walking and soon the chariot of fire and the whirlwind come and to take Elijah away. Young Elisha cries out, “Father, father!” and Elijah throws him his mantle, as he goes out of sight.

Elisha picks up the mantle, leaves the scene, and as he approaches the Jordan, he takes the mantle and strikes the river. Sure enough, the river parts, and like his mentor, he crosses over on dry ground. Yes, God is still at work. Yes, still there is a troubler in Israel.

A new troubler. A good troubler.

And kings and queens and autocratic wannabes, governors, billionaires, and the rest of the rich and powerful tweet their outrage, “Can’t we be rid of these troublemakers?!”

But they keep on coming, leaning in, because God keeps calling them.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.