

Troublers

About 100 years after David's unified kingdom was left in tatters, we meet our first prophet, at least the first one whose name we know. And we—or they—could really use a prophet about now. On the heels of Jeroboam's building shrines to keep the people from wandering back to Jerusalem and into Rehoboam's arms, there is conflict and conspiring. While the southern kingdom sees at least one faithful king for a bit, both kingdoms are in disarray. Alliances are formed with foreign rulers and power grabs further subvert faithfulness as the law of the land. Other men of God are mentioned, but it is now that the defined role of the prophet comes to the fore. This morning's text takes place during the reign of Ahab. King Ahab has married Jezebel of Sidon and has begun worshipping the gods she brought along in her trousseau. Jezebel is everything her name has come to mean, and more. Just before our text for today, she has ordered that the prophets of Israel be killed. Elijah will soon be the next on her list. [Read 1 Kings 18:17-39]

As I have said before, the ham in me loves the drama of this story. It is easy to be swept up in the smack talk and the pyrotechnics. Honestly, I, too would love to engage some false prophets in some smack talk, and I would love for God to rain down fire on the bad guys every once in a while. Or at least I think I would. Then I see the images of the blazes out west and I hear the raging rhetoric in our common life—the booing, the name-calling, the grand-standing, the pettiness, and I wonder what if anything this wild-eyed prophet has to offer us, especially on All Saints' Sunday. It is a fun text on one level, but on another it hits a tender spot, one that I don't want anything to touch right now. But Elijah is not here to comfort me, or King Ahab for that matter. Ahab rightly refers to him as the “troubler of Israel,” and that it seems is his sacred and holy calling.

This is not Elijah's first run in with Ahab. In chapter 16, we are told that Ahab takes unfaithfulness and idolatry to another level, doing “more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”¹ Elijah warns Ahab of a coming drought because of Ahab's devotion to Baal and insists that the drought will continue until he, Elijah, says it should end. No wonder Ahab thinks he's a

¹ 1 Kings 16:33, New Revised Standard Version

troubler. My hunch is he's called him much worse. And while Elijah is quick to point out that Ahab is the true menace, something tells me that Elijah embraces the nickname. The Hebrew word points to stirring up and roiling up water. God knows that Israel is in trouble and that a holy troubler is needed to attempt to save her and bring her back around.

While I haven't seen the Harriet Tubman movie yet, it is on my list. As you may know Tubman escaped from a farm in Maryland where she and her siblings were the property of the Brodess family. She later returns to free others as a part of the Underground Railroad. One reviewer points out that:

She is both part of a movement and something of a maverick within it, taking her instructions directly from God and setting out on missions that her colleagues often regard as irresponsibly risky.²

Sounds like she and Elijah may have something in common. At one point in the film, Harriet insists, "I will give every last drop of blood in my veins, until this monster called slavery is dead."³ She stands convicted that God does not intend for people to own people. It is not simply about her own family. She sees a nation that has gone astray, and she hears God calling her to stir up trouble and make things right.

One could argue that Elijah takes ridiculous risks, too. Who in their right mind challenges 850 prophets to a showdown? Especially when those prophets serve rulers who have vowed to wipe out any and all who do not do their bidding? Elijah does, and he does it with gusto and not simply for show. He is concerned about the fate of God's beloved children because God is concerned about the fate of God's beloved children. They are under the thumb of a king and queen who round up and eliminate prophets on a whim, it seems. No dissenting voice is tolerated or allowed. Some scholars think that Ahab agrees to Elijah's terms because of the potential of God's lone prophet's being embarrassed on a monumental scale. First Ahab will embarrass Elijah, he thinks, and then he will have him killed. It seems that Ahab has forgotten who this God is, for it is Ahab's god who does not show up; it is Ahab's god, the supposed god of thunderstorms and his pitiful limping prophets who are embarrassed. And the people who have been limping along themselves, hedging their bets and weighing their options are now convinced and convicted. At least for the moment these led-astray people understand that the

² A. O. Scott, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/movies/harriet-review.html>

³ Trailer: <https://youtu.be/GqoEs4cG6Uw>

God of their ancestors, the God who brought them out of Egypt, led them through the desert, ushered them into the Promised Land and built them into a holy kingdom is still the one and only God, no matter what the powers that be want to claim, no matter how much fear, cruelty, and violence they wield. God cannot be bullied or sidelined or silenced, and on occasion God needs troublemakers to stir things up and make that point clear.

I don't usually look to be a troublemaker. I have spent the bulk of my life trying to avoid getting into trouble. I play by the rules and like to keep people happy, especially with me. And yet, at times I wonder whose rules I am following and whom exactly I am trying to keep happy. The children of Israel limp between the God of all and the god of Ahab and Jezebel. Where am I limping or hedging my bets? And why would I choose to limp when the Lord of the Universe has called me to dance in joy, peace, and freedom? And yet I am not Elijah. Last time I checked I do not have the power to call forth a drought or end one either, nor do I have the ability to rain down fire from heaven.

The observance of All Saints' Day is not one I grew up with, but I now look forward to this day every year when we pause and give thanks for all those who have gone before us in the faith, including those who have died in the past year. And on this day when we give thanks for saints and souls who have gone before us, I am reminded that the faithful are not always troublemakers on a grand scale or on the world stage. Yes, there are the Harriets and the Elijahs, the Martins and the Joan of Arcs, but there are Pats and Dicks and LaVons and Marys, too. These and others are the faithful ones who showed up for us and for others, who did not buy into a false gospel of wealth and glitz, who served and worshiped the Lord of all, who showed kindness in quiet ways. Such faithfulness is troubling in a world that wants us to denigrate and dismiss one another, a world that taunts us to boo and tempts us to divide, a world that tells us the one who dies with the most toys wins and that anyone who needs a helping hand is somehow getting a better and undeserved deal.

It is important that we understand that saints are not perfect. In the verses that follow ours, Elijah's story takes a vengeful and violent turn, as he calls on the people to kill the prophets of Baal. It is a violent time, and Elijah and the people still have a price on their heads, but it is a grisly scene. That said, Elijah plays a pivotal role in our tradition. He is a saint not because he is perfect but because he does not stand by and let the wrongs he witnesses go unchallenged or untroubled. Harriet Tubman could have won freedom for herself and even her

family and stopped there. Instead she went to the trouble of troubling the evils of slavery for the sake of countless others and for the sake of a nation that was not living up to her claims to be a place where all are understood to be God's children, where all are created equal.

And so, dear saints, as we move to the table, I invite you to consider what kind of trouble you have caused or will cause in the name of this God who loves and lifts up troublemakers. Will you trouble despair by bringing hope? Will you trouble racism, anti-Semitism, or xenophobia by showing up and speaking out? Will you trouble exclusion by opening your arms wide in welcome? Will you trouble hatred by showing love? Because God does not always rain down fire to bring down the false prophets and Ahabs and Jezebels of this world. No, our God troubles the water and roils the powers through ordinary saints like you and me, saints who do our faithful best to follow the one who invites us to this table. Some thought Jesus was Elijah come again, because he rattled the High Priests and unsettled the Romans. He turned over tables in the Temple and claimed the heart of Jerusalem from the back of a donkey. And he troubled the expected narrative of a heroic savior king by dying on a criminal's cross. Jesus was in his own way, in God's own way, the most faithful troubler of Israel, God made flesh, who went and still goes to the trouble of turning the world on its head to save us one and all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.