

Calling Down Fire (26June22) 1Kings19:15-16,19-21; Luke9:51-62; Galatians5:1,13-25

I want to start with Elijah, from our First Reading.

He's quite a character, but the strange excerpt we heard doesn't give much of a picture, as he's told to go and anoint people. (Incidentally, people who will kill people, described in the little gap of verses our reading skipped.)

This takes place while Elijah is hiding in a cave at Mount Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai. Just before this is the perhaps better-known scene where a mighty wind goes by, but God isn't in the wind. Then an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a fire, but God's not in the fire. Then the sound of silence, or a still small voice. God asks what Elijah is doing hiding in a cave.

He's been hiding because he'd just been in a fight or duel or contest with 450 prophets of Baal. The challenge was to call fire down from the sky, a notable detail for us today. The 450 couldn't do it, including as Elijah kept taunting them. But then Elijah's calling out to his God did bring down fire. And Elijah evidently figured his reward or spoils of victory was to go ahead and kill the 450 prophets of Baal.

That Elijah: he doesn't play well with others. Kind of an angry loner. So he fled, and was hiding in a cave, also afraid of the queen who was threatening him for killing her prophets.

So, again, in the cave God repeats the question of why Elijah is hiding. And Elijah, the angry loner, grumbles he's the only one left, the only faithful one, the only one true to the true God.

God ignores him and says, No. There are thousands. And then God tells Elijah to get to work anyhow, as we heard today, to go anoint successors, that Elijah not only isn't the only one, but that it's time for others to continue the work.

Still, this is a contrast.* Elijah goes to Elisha. Elijah, the angry outsider, is to be replaced by an insider. Elijah was hunted by rulers; Elisha will counsel them. Elijah was far at the margins, wandering the wilderness; Elisha is closer to the

centers of power. A detail in today's reading is illuminating: that Elisha has twelve yoke of oxen says he is among the rare wealthy landowners, able even to butcher oxen for a going-away feast, while Elijah most recently needed to be fed by ravens, and just before all this relied on a widow offering a starvation diet of bread.

We also note today that, given God's instructions, Elijah has poor follow-through. He's told to anoint three people, none of which happens. He finds Elisha, but throws his overcoat at him instead of anointing. Hazael will later be anointed by Elisha instead. And Jehu, later still, will be anointed by one of Elisha's assistants, a third-degree fulfilling of what God asked of Elijah, who himself seems to fall fairly short on God's directions.

At that, let's jump to the Gospel reading, a transition moment, as Luke turns to Jerusalem and the eventual climax and point of the story, of Jesus' death and resurrection.

On the way, the first wayside rest stop would be a Samaritan village, but Jesus isn't stopping. The refusal is mutual: he doesn't want them, so they don't want him. But the disciples decide to take offense. They have high aspirations in the finest tradition of biblical bigwigs to become angry loners, and with delusions of grandeur think they can play Elijah, calling down fire from the sky against their alleged opponents.

It wasn't their finest moment. Jesus rebukes them, and goes into a refresher course of what it is to be a disciple.

So let's jump to now, and you as disciples. You may or may not hear God's still, small voice whispering to you about direction. You may feel an outsider like Elijah—and maybe even an angry one—or be the rich and well-established consummate community insider like Elisha. You may play well with others and get along with mainstream society or may want to pick a fight. You may feel so very faithful and successful, or you may have to admit that you've fallen short of what's been asked of you.

* with some insights from <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-1-kings-1915-16-19-21-5>

Not least, you may be listening for the rebuke.

This week someone—not from this congregation—was telling me about hearing something at the front door and finding a Ron Johnson flyer tucked in the screen. While the person was starting to wad it up, the deliverer was still nearby and asked about their feelings of Ron Johnson. “I hope he burns in hell,” was the knee-jerk reply, with the later admission, “It wasn’t my finest moment.”

The point isn’t the politics, for it easily could’ve gone the other way. The point is that this person had some recognition that trying to call down divine fire isn’t our finest moment as disciples, though these days we’re frequently prone to it.

At Friday’s rally down at the Capitol after the Supreme Court decision overturning the right to an abortion, there was vehement exuberance in chants with similar sentiment about Ron Johnson. There may be good reason to be angry, to want to turn the tables, to invoke wrath. And admittedly it wouldn’t be out of line with many biblical bigwigs.

In softer terms than Jesus’ rebuke, Galatians refers to these “dark desires” as part of our “broken human ways,” recognizing that we’re not good at avoiding that path. Still, following Jesus and led by the Spirit, it says we are meant rather for “the fruit of love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, faithful hearts, gentle ways, and self-control.”

Now, I absolutely don’t want you take this to imply that women should be gentle instead of angry. That abuses the notion. But then I also can’t say how such benefits of the Spirit will come to fruition in us post-Roe or in much any other setting to which we are called in unsettled times, and where living out our faith is extremely vital and necessary for a more just society and the life of the world.

Maybe what we accept today is that being led by the Spirit and following Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll get it right, or will complete the tasks that have been assigned to us, and we may still get angry and try to call down fire or wish for

somebody to burn in hell, or we may be overwhelmed and try to hide from it all.

But we do expect to be guided by the Spirit, to dance in step with the Spirit, to be good disciples, loving our neighbors, in all the complexity that means.

And maybe there’s an encouragement to action in this reminder from Galatians: Jesus “set us free so that we can remain free, so stand firm and do not let anyone rope you into being slaves again.”

Hymn: Lead Me, Guide Me (ELW 768)