

Here Comes Trouble

This is a sermon about memories

Dangerous memories. Memories with power to make things happen –

And it's a sermon about choice.

When I was young, at family gatherings, the adults would say when they saw us kids coming

“Here comes trouble.”

It was said with affection, with a smile. They were glad we were there. We felt that. It meant someone noticed we were there; someone cared enough to tease us, take us seriously that way. Here comes trouble.

So for me, the word trouble has first of all, those memories attached to it. The feelings of those family gatherings. “Here comes trouble”.

The other personal way the word touches me most is from Simon and Garfunkel's classic Bridge Over Troubled Water. As a teenager, that song reached into the depths of all my adolescent angst. Just at the time when I was leaving my Barbie and Ken world, where I was always Barbie and Ken and Skipper did what I said,entering a world where things were confusing, and the world can hurt you so badly, and feeling sometimes overcome with an emptiness that ...is just part of being an adult, but I didn't know that then....the way friends can betray you and leave you feeling violated and humiliated....life is so intense when you're 16. Later too! Bridge Over Troubled Water said it all for me, and spoke to my longing for a friend, someone who would be for me that bridge, when the waters were troubled. And my longing to be that bridge for someone else too. It played a huge part in my growing understanding of God, who God is for me....

And it was so important in fact that when we were married, Nate and I sang that to each other as part of our vows. Bridge Over Troubled Water. Trouble.

One final personal memory – a phone call in the night from a friend. She was younger than I – still in high school and I was at university by then. The phone rang in my apartment, her voice – no introduction just “Bev – I'm in trouble”. In those days – that meant only one thing. She was pregnant. And THAT meant only one thing –her life as she had planned it up until then – was over.

Trouble. I'm in trouble.

Lots of energy around that word. It's not a vacuous word; not anaemic, or flat – it has some craggy and bloody edges, that word. *Trouble*.

In Ireland they refer to the bloodiest most sad and violent time in their history as “The Troubles”

So...it was the time when Ahab was king. He and his wife Jezebel, to give them a bit of credit, were trying to bring political stability to the north by establishing alliances with other countries. With that

stability, though, came the customs and religions of those other countries. Some in Israel supported it and enjoyed the benefits that the international and intercultural mingling brought. Others, though, a minority we understand, saw the actions of the King and Queen for what they apparently really were: power grabbing masquerading as multiculturalism, and abdication of leadership responsibility spun into international cooperation. Selling out the truth for political clout. If the cooperation had been honest and genuine things may have been different. On the other hand, it would be interesting to hear it from Ahab and Jezebel's point of view wouldn't it? What we have is this account clearly from an author who sees the policies of Ahab and Jezebel as idolatrous and disastrous both politically and religiously.

However you see it, we know that one man was incensed. Elijah the Tishbite. Elijah saw the king and queen as idolatrous; not only forsaking God themselves but leading their people to do the same. He ranted and railed – he shouted and wept – and almost single-handedly brought Israel back to God, in the end. He was a man of God – a single minded, uncompromising, hairy, fiery, shrill man – a rock star of a prophet...larger than life and utterly convinced that the God of Israel had called him to bring the people back home.

Ahab called him "Troubler of Israel" . And when Elijah came along and Ahab said "Here comes trouble" he meant it. Troubler of Israel.

That's a great expression. There should be an award like that – sort of like the Order of Canada, for social activists. Troubler of Israel. What an honour. What a name by which to be known. Elijah the Tishbite, TOI. Troubler of Israel. When they see you coming into the meeting, when they get your letter to the editor, when you step up to the microphone, when they see that you're running for office or asking for a hearing...the power grabbers tremble. Troubler of Israel.

We need more troublers.

The memory of him has fuelled others you know – as powerful as the memories I began with (the family setting, my own wedding, my friend in trouble) as powerful as those memories of that word are for me, and they have formed my own being and acting in the world...

In the same way except more WAAAY more, the memory of Elijah the Tishbite, Troubler of Israel – that memory has fuelled and fed and formed the likes of Martin Luther King, Nellie McClung, Nelson Mandela, Sojourner Truth, Tommy Douglas....and on and on. To be a troubler of Israel – what better more honourable calling?

And it's the memories that do it, you know. The stories – that's what gets you going. Stories that get into your bones. The words like rows of seeds planted in your soul....the telling of them like water, the retelling like the sun coaxing the growth until all of a sudden you find yourself a troubler of your own Israel too.

Read the stories about Elijah – let them be for you the energy, the memory, the spirit and strength to become a troubler. Read them all. Start in 1 Kings 17, 18 and 19 – fabulous, rich, strange, disturbing, community forming, imagination massaging STORIES.

Here's just one: You can find it in 1 Kings 18. You won't find any comic book super hero more exciting. You won't find any independent movie more edgy, no political cartoon more hilarious. Listen: the scene is that God has sent Elijah to Ahab. There has been a drought in the land; Ahab is looking for water. The narrator sees the drought as punishment for worshipping the Baal gods. Listen now, let this storybe for you the Living Word of God – let it be sweet like honey in the comb.

1 Kings 18: 17

As soon as Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, *"Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"*

"It is not I who have troubled Israel" he replied "but you and your father's family, by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and following Baal. But now, send and summon all Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal with them and the 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah, who are Jezebel's pensioners."

20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah then came near to all the people, and said,

'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? (ISN'T THAT A GREAT EXPRESSION?????) If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.'

The people did not answer him a word. ²²Then Elijah said to the people,

'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. ²³Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.'

All the people answered, *'Well spoken!'* ²

⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, *'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.'*

²⁶So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, *'O Baal, answer us!'*

But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made.

²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, *'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'*

²⁸Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. ²⁹As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people,

'Come closer to me';

and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, *'Israel shall be your name';* ³²with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. ³³Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said,

'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.'

³⁴Then he said, *'Do it a second time';*

and they did it a second time. Again he said, *'Do it a third time'*

; and they did it a third time, ³⁵so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

³⁶ At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said,

'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people

may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.'

³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said,

'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'

⁴⁰Elijah said to them, *'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.'*

Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

So – that's the story. Strange and disturbing. Funny and frightening. Oddly empowering. Elijah – man of God. Elijah -

The troubler of Israel.

When I hear the word trouble it brings back memories that are strong enough to make me make decisions about my life different that I would otherwise have made. Memories are strong. Memory is power. Stories are life.

This man of God, troubler of Israel, let him be part of who you are. Let his story be part of your memory; who you know yourself to be. May God bless you as you continue your journey – Amen.