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Quiet in the Land¹

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Text: 1 Kings 21

Today Leshy Paynter is happy! Nervous too, I guess, Leshy—but happy! Look at him! And look at his family! Leshy, look around you. I suspect you already have. You see your friends, your family, your new congregation, your bishop. The world as it should be is here. South Africa has come here to celebrate with you, family and exile alike. Black and white are here, those who have shared your pain, your walk, your journey, your joy and sorrow, hopes and dreams. Those who have welcomed your witness for justice are here in the name of two lands—the new South Africa and the new Canada. For at least this brief space we have thrown apartheid outside of our midst and outside of our nation. We are visibly celebrating the people of God as it ought to be. We thank God today, Leshy, the God who has used Leshy Paynter and Pilgrim Lutheran Church to show us visibly this church as it ought to be. The little flock of white, black, and brown, the poor, the oppressed, the middle-class, raising a living voice to justice. The prophets in our midst—that's who you are—showing us the way. We celebrate the Gospel, the Good News, that shows us the gifts that God calls you, Leshy, and you, Pilgrim people of God, to give to the church. Let's praise God for that! Let's praise God for that today! Celebrate today, because all too soon there will be QUIET in the land! Business as usual!

Leshy Paynter, Pilgrim people of God, when I think of God's call to you, and for you, I see an image of the prophet Elijah. I see God calling you to be Elijah for us... to shatter the quiet in the land and expose the sin of our "business as

usual". King Ahab wanted Naboth's land... his vineyard. And he offered a good price for that land. But Naboth couldn't and wouldn't sell. Why not? He could have made a neat profit on the deal. But his answer was clear and simple. "God forbids that I give you the inheritance of my ancestors." For him, the land was a trust, the extension of promise and covenant. But Ahab, who had wealth and power, wanted that promise for his own private garden. Surely that was enough. "Do you now govern Israel?" said Jezebel his queen. If you want it, it's your's. You have the money, the power. You are the law. Take it. So they trumped up charges against Naboth, ran him through a quick kangaroo court and this is what the Bible had to say: "They killed him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones. And Jezebel said to Ahab, 'Arise, take possession of Naboth's vineyard which he refused to give to you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.' And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to his vineyard to take possession of it." Then there was quiet in the land. Business as usual.

Are we so different? We welcome back Brian Rude and others from the brutality of the right-wing regime of El Salvador, write a letter or two, and then "business as usual". We write beautiful statements against apartheid and then struggle with how to use our money in the anti-apartheid struggle. And so often in the church, ecclesiastical financial good sense—the investment on monetary return takes precedence over justice. We operate like our banks: "Business as usual." Women are slaughtered in Montreal. We have a few prayers, shed genuine tears, maybe have a vigil or two, and then "business as usual". In our land, in this century, blacks and strikers have been beaten and killed by our forces of law and order. Jews have been forbidden entry into the country. Japanese citizens have been herded into concentration camps: To ensure "quiet in the land... business as usual."

Leshy, and the Pilgrim people of God whom you serve, you know a bit of this already. You're part of this very oppression and quiet, victims of "business as usual". Most of our churches have property, and our clergy live in homes—either owned by the congregation or homes that they're buying themselves—while you and your people have scrambled to find affordable housing, decent housing for Leshy, Gilty and their family to

live. Also all of you can say "Will we one day ever have our own house of God in which to worship?", you, the tent people of God, called Pilgrim.

And what are we likely to hear from others? Well, it's the price of real estate in Toronto. If there were a larger financial base for the congregation maybe a normal life could be afforded. Not solvent enough to live in Toronto means you must scurry for decent property.

The reality however is real estate speculation and financiers have taken Naboth's vineyard. The poor have been pushed into the streets... the so-called "free market" of housing is only free for landlords, financiers, and speculators. It is slavery, poverty, homelessness, or crowded tenements for the poor and oppressed. But what do we hear? That's the way it is! Business as usual!

Naboth's vineyard has been stolen and Naboth killed, but life goes on. Quiet in the land. Business as usual. We go to work on Monday morning, clean our homes, cook our meals, celebrate our holidays, preach our sermons, celebrate our eucharists, pray our prayers, cash our paycheques, take our vacations. Naboth is expelled... Naboth is murdered... Poor Naboth. But, thank God, there is again quiet in the land.

And then came Elijah who shattered that quiet in the land; who said, "Business as usual is not God's business." And in God's name Elijah stood before the King and Ahab knew why. He cried out to the prophet, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel? Have you found me, my enemy?"

It's the same story with all the Elijahs, isn't it? Leshy, for you, and for you, Pilgrim people of God, they might call you trouble makers, breakers of the peace. You may be accused of being narrow and obsessed. They might tell you you have a martyr's complex. There could be financial and job loss. You could be called communists like Tommy Douglas or Madeleine Parent. You could be thrown in jail like the Rev. James Shaver Woodsworth, or Pastor Douglas Roth of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You will hear concerns of constitutions, law and order, doctrine and other things thrown at you, and you will be lonely. You will suffer the experiences of Agnes Mcphail and Nellie McClung and other brave women who exposed sexism and injustice in our own society. And Elijahs get killed too!—Steve Biko, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero. These are some of the things you face. I wish it weren't so. But this is what the forces of "business as usual" will do to restore quiet in the land.

But Elijah still speaks out. He responds to the king. "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your house, because you have forsaken God's commandments to follow false gods. I have sought you out because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of God." Elijah had his call—to speak out, to name evil, and in so doing, to shatter the quiet in the land. Leshy, and the Pilgrim people here, this is your call. You embody a call in your very existence and by virtue of the call to the wider church.

Today, Leshy, you will be asked to vow obedience to the ministry of Gospel and Sacrament, and the people who have called you will be asked to promise to support this ministry. In some ways that seems very distant and very foreign to Naboth, Ahab, and Elijah. But it is not. Every word preached, every sacrament administered, blesses Naboth and the prophetic voice of Elijah. It is the voice of Elijah in word and sacrament.

The eucharistic altar is not a haven of safety from the brutality and injustice outside. Nor is it a tranquilizer to shut out the evil round about. Instead, it is the broken and shattered body of Jesus of Nazareth—his blood poured out for many at a public garbage dump where Rome executed Jewish freedom fighters. Oscar Romero was gunned down while lifting the eucharistic cup at his altar. Father Joseph LaFontaine and Michel Favreau who worked on the docks, and with their calloused hands lifted the eucharistic nightly, were crushed by tons of weight dropped from a faulty crane. The women of asbestos in 1949 were walking to church to pray and celebrate the eucharist when the police of Maurice Duplessis bludgeoned them to the ground. Jesus broke passover bread as an outcast, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer celebrated a eucharist shortly before he went to the gallows.

And the word we preach is not without flesh and blood either. Only two times did Jesus summarize his preaching and vocation, and both times his words included—indeed, they even embodied!—release to captives, good news for the poor, liberty for the oppressed, healing of the sick and maimed, and just and equitable land distribution. Justification, the heart of

our faith, and justice are flip sides of the same coin biblically. Freedom in Christ is another word for liberation.

In your vow, Leshy, and in the vow of the people who have called you resides the call of Elijah. Teach us—by these vows, by your promises, by your ministry for justice, by your proclamation of word and sacrament, by the door knocking in a neighbourhood of United Nations, by the hospital bed, in your private prayers—teach us.

I've been honoured to preach today. Bishop William is laying his hands on your head, but we and your other friends—brothers and sisters and visitors—have much to learn from you and your congregation. You're closer to the wretched of the earth. We are more cushioned than you, more tempted to seek "business as usual". We ask your help. Be the Elijah we are afraid to be. Remind us when we are tempted to isolate faith from justice that Jeremiah said these words: "The cause of the poor and needy... is not that to know me?" says the Lord."

And when you're broken by the pain and load, and loneliness and failure threaten to drown you, and when some turn away (and are rewarded for that), you are still called to be Elijah. He himself crawled away broken and wanted to die. Nonetheless, God was still with Elijah. Even when church and state failed him, the word from God was this: "I will leave in Israel 7,000 who have not bowed down before false gods." He thought he was alone and he was not. Seven thousand were with him. That's a small group but he wasn't alone. And God works with the tiny, forgotten little groups to do the divine task. Elijah is not alone. Some of us will be with you—you can count on that; some of us probably won't, and that's cause for grief. But the 7,000 behind the doors of your neighbourhood, and among your brothers and sisters, will come to meet you and be with you. And above all, God will be with you—and that you can count on! Do your job, Leshy. Do your job, Pilgrim people. Do it 'til "the bow, sword and war are abolished from the land," until "the lion shall lie down with the lamb," until we all "do justice, render mercy and walk humbly with our God." And only then will "the quiet in the land" be replaced by banquets of righteousness, and "business as usual" will be the Realm of God among us.

Notes

¹ Ordination Sermon for Leshy Paynter, January 1990, who is a native South African.