

Hespeler June 29, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Kings 19:15-21](#), Psalm 16, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

Of all the time management tools that I have ever tried, the one that I can never quite get a handle on is the to-do list. The time management gurus will tell you that this is the great tool, the tool that will set you free. You just create a list of all the things that you have to get done, breaking them up into the smallest steps, and you put one of those infernal check boxes to the side of each one.

It's motivational, they say. Every time you finish one small task you get to check off the box and you feel this little endorphin boost and it makes you feel like you have the energy you need to tackle the next one.

Don't Work for Me

It doesn't really work for me. When I make the list, I am much more likely to feel overwhelmed than motivated. It reminds me more of what I haven't done than it makes me think of what I could do. And making and maintaining the list itself just feels to me as if I am adding another task to the ones that I already have too many of.

But that is just me. Maybe they do work better for you; in fact, I hope that they do. But as one of the to-do list challenged people of this world, I am just glad to know, in our reading from 1 Kings this morning, that I am not alone.

Elijah's Crisis

Last week we read the story of how the Prophet Elijah went through a major crisis. In a moment of great emergency and danger he performed one of the most amazing feats of running away in the history of running away. He ran away from Queen Jezebel who had threatened his life and he ran all the way from Samaria to Mount Horeb. That is an incredible distance of over 600 km. It would normally take someone walking at a reasonable pace about 18 days.

He was running because he didn't know how to respond to the crisis. He went to Mount Horeb, that place where God had appeared to Moses, because he clearly wanted God to tell him what to do. And, in our reading this morning, God actually does that. God appears to Elijah in the midst of the sound of sheer silence and gives him a to-do list.

Short List

The list is mercifully short. There are only three check boxes. He is to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, anoint Jehu as king over Israel and anoint Elisha as prophet in his own place. And that really seems like a wonderful thing that God does for Elijah, doesn't it? Wouldn't you love to receive a clear and concise list like that directly from God? Wouldn't you love to know with absolute clarity what you needed to do in order to obey God?

But here is the thing that has always puzzled me about this story. Of those three simple tasks, the Bible tells us that Elijah only ticked off one to-do box. We read the story this morning



of how he called Elisha to be his disciple. He didn't literally anoint him with oil, but he definitely called him. So the final item is checked off the list.

The Other Two Items

But what about the other two? Well, that is quite the story. You see in both of those cases, the person to be anointed was someone serving a ruling king as a subordinate. They were not the heirs. They hadn't been chosen to succeed the previous king. In both cases they killed the ruling monarch. So, what God is telling Elijah to do is engineer a coup by telling these men that they can become kings of their countries.

God is telling Elijah to meddle in the politics of two nations – his own and its biggest neighbour. What's more, he is being told to do it in the most disruptive and destructive way imaginable. This will lead to endless death and violence, as God admits by summing up, **“Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.”**

Engineering Coups

Can you imagine such a thing today? Can you imagine one country deciding to bomb another in order to bring about regime change? Even worse, can you imagine a Canadian Christian clergy person going to Federal Cabinet Minister Chrystia Freeland and telling her that, if she were to mount a violent coup to take out Prime Minister Carney, that God would be with her and she would succeed? Can you imagine that preacher then going to US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and telling him to do the same thing to Trump?

Of course not! That would be madness! That would be seen as an unacceptable intrusion of religion into politics. And it is a disturbing reflection of the deeply troubling times that we are living in that I actually wouldn't be surprised if we did see something like that happen (at least in the U.S) before the end of this year?

Disturbing Idea

But that is the disturbing idea that is raised in this story – this idea of people of faith intervening in the world of politics and not even to try to make things better. God is not asking Elijah to advocate for laws and politicians that he supports – that would be one thing and not necessarily a bad thing if done appropriately.

No, this is about people of faith intervening in order to stir things up and cause violence and chaos. This is about disrupting the entire system in the hope that maybe, once the dust settles, there might be a chance of building a better system from the ground up.

Modern Like-Minded People

And yet, even as I say that, I realize that there are at least some Christians in our world today who are rooting for exactly that. They are hoping that the latest troubles in the Middle East or Iran or on the streets of Los Angeles blow up into World War III so that the world comes to an end and Jesus can return. And, once again, it is a symptom of the times that we are living in that that seems somewhat possible these days.

In any case, that is what is at stake in the to-do list that God gives to Elijah. And if Elijah were to have followed through on two of those bullet points, I think I would be troubled by that. I would

wonder how we are supposed to apply that to our modern Christian lives and particularly what it would say about how we are to live as people of faith in such troubling political times.

He Didn't Do It

But, as I say, Elijah didn't do it. We know that he didn't do it because we are told, later on in the Second Book of Kings, that other people engineered those coups, and they did so after Elijah was gone. Jehu was anointed by an unnamed prophet sent by Elisha in the ninth chapter of 2 Kings. ([9:1-13](#)) And Elisha himself provoked Hazael to rebel against his master in the eighth chapter. ([2 Kings 8:7-15](#))

And you may say, "Big deal. So what if Elijah didn't do the anointing himself and it didn't happen for a while. It still happened which means that God is still in control. Who cares if there is a little glitch in the text and that Elijah doesn't complete his do-to list?"

A Message for Us

Well, I care. As I have said many times, I don't believe in glitches in the text. Sure, sometimes there may be contradictions and plot holes and historical errors, but I have accepted that this is a book inspired by God which means that I have to struggle with all of those things and try to find the message in those things for us.

And I think there *is* a message for us in Elijah's to-do list failure, and it is a message that is particularly helpful for these tumultuous times in which we find ourselves.

For one thing anyway, I've got to admit that I really appreciate Elijah's hesitancy to wade into such disruptive political acts. There is a long history of the Christian faith that has demonstrated again and again that some very terrible things can result when that line between politics and religion is breached.

Many of the worst abuses of power, the massacres and the atrocities that nations have carried out in their history have occurred when political leaders took their cue from religious leaders. I think we should definitely hesitate to open the door to such possibilities again. And yet, there is always the question of how to balance that hesitancy against the demands of living faithfully.

Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation

It was 76 years ago that the Presbyterian Church in Canada wrestled with this problem. At that time, the church produced a document called the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation.

This was produced at a time when our denomination still had a fair bit of political influence in this country. At that very moment, we were enthusiastically participating in the government program of Residential Schools for indigenous children – something that the church saw as greatly benefiting itself at the expense, as we have since been made abundantly aware, of the welfare of the indigenous nations and people.

Wise Council

And yet, this document wisely counselled that the church must approach such things with care. *"Christians must always do their utmost to honour the civil laws, and to fulfil all statutory obligations whether financial or personal, as unto Christ the Head. Nevertheless, no citizen is thereby relieved of his constant responsibility to work for the remedy of any unjust statute, or iniquitous assessment, or violation of conscience."*

That statement is still considered to be so important that, when ministers and elders are ordained, we accept this document as one of our standards. And I do not think we should forget it because it can be so hard to sort out that tension between supporting the state and advocating for what is right and just within the state.

And so, yes, let us continue to hesitate to jump on in, let us always be ready to give sober and careful thought as this document shows us. I have actually printed a few copies of the document. It isn't long and you should read it if you haven't.

Disruption

So, I do appreciate Elijah's hesitance. Of course, none of that ultimately stops the kind of disruption that God seems to be calling for from occurring. The men did eventually get anointed with all of the negative and violent consequences that came with that. I see a message in that as well.

The reality of this world seems to be that these kinds of disruptions do occur. We may do everything that we can to make sure that we set up good and just systems. But no political system is perfect.

Cracks will begin to form sooner or later, especially when there are big disparities in wealth and power in a society. Those who have a lot tend to create rules that will get them even more while those who have not increasingly feel that they can no longer succeed without breaking the rules.

Tumultuous Times

One way or another, whatever order is created in this world will break down sooner or later. And I don't necessarily want to be the one making predictions here, but it does seem that we are moving into such a time. And I think that God giving these disruptive to-dos to Elijah, even if Elijah himself does not follow through on them, is a way of saying that we cannot completely avoid this kind of turmoil in life.

Yes, let's do whatever we can to find other ways to bring about positive change. But also take comfort from knowing that, even in the major disruptions that sometimes erupt in this world, God can be at work.

In the end, Elijah is put in a difficult spot when he encounters God at Mount Horeb. God seems to be saying that they are coming to a moment when the only way of acting is in this disruptive political way. I am glad that Elijah hesitates to do that. I hesitate too.

But let us also take some wisdom from the to-do that Elijah actually follows through on. He calls Elisha as his disciple. He chooses, in other words, to enter into partnership and community. He finds someone who he can support and who can support him. That creation of solidarity is always the right thing to do. And if we can build our coalitions of those who are committed to God's justice in this often-unjust world, we will be well placed, no matter what difficult times may come.