

# A Disruptive Word

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 June, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Jane Fry

Pentecost 2C

1Kings 19: 1-15 a; Luke 8: 26-39

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szEhpNfDnMw>

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The Lord be with you.

And thanks for having me I've never - never been here before in this capacity, so it's a bit of a buzz. I should tell you that I'm a bit allergic to church anniversaries. Just putting that out there.

The question that I always want to ask is: *has the Uniting Church lived up to its promise as a national church?* I'm not going to answer the question I'm just going to ask the question and I think it's a good question.

*Has it lived up to the major statements and commitments that it's made along the way?* The commitment to First Peoples in the covenant, the commitment to being a multicultural church, the mutual ministry of men and women, sexuality and leadership; has it lived up to the vision it put to the community in the Statement to the Nation?

I think we should hold on to those questions because I think they're really important. It's always time to take that sort of stock. So that's the anniversary bit.

You have asked the general secretary to come and talk to you eleven days before Synod. Yes! Not really fantastic timing, given that front of mind is very preoccupied with a very large meeting that's happening in eleven days' time, so I'm going to give you a Synod rev-up. OK? And tell you a bit about this one before I move on to thinking other thoughts.

And I know there are ex-Moderators here and that's just a problem. But I would say that most Synod meetings in my experience would bore the wings off a bat - and we can't keep doing that. It's a very large meeting - there will be nearly 400 people gathered at Knox Grammar to participate in the Synod meeting.

I now know, in the office that I'm responsible for, that it's a very very expensive meeting. It draws membership from across the breadth of the church in New South Wales and the ACT.

And in my view all of those circumstances mean that it should be a place where significant decisions are made. It should not be a place where we get so internally focused that we spin our wheels - which we have done sometimes.

It should be a place where directions for the church are clarified. It should be a place to engage, to seriously engage, with the challenges of being the church in this world in this place at this time. That's what it should be.

And because of that this Synod has been organized slightly differently. In the first place, its 3 days instead of 4 - and my very firm hope is that that concentrates everybody's attention so that we don't talk ourselves into a coma.

I've organized for some very significant provocation on the agenda. And that will happen in the form of a half hour Ted talk from a voice outside the church.

One of those will be Josh Gilbert who's a young Indigenous farmer who is a climate change activist who is going to talk to the church about climate action and the responsibility that the church has to the world in this space, given that it claims a story about creation being good, good, and very very good. So I'm looking forward to what Josh has to say to us.

You probably know Jon Owen from the Wayside Chapel. He's going to speak to us about the reality and the experiences of the Wayside ministry with people really on the edges. So you know what that is; it's homelessness, it's violence, it's drug addiction, it's mental health issues, it's a whole edgy, people on the edge, ministry. And Jon's going to provoke us about our responsibilities to actually hold fast to what we say about human being in the work that we do with those people whose humanity is diminished.

And the last one is Karina Kreminski who teaches theology at Morling College and she is wanting the church to get out there. To get involved in ministry in local communities, neighbourhood churches, to make partnerships and to make a difference that is relevant in that space.

So I'm really, really hoping that those 3 speakers will give us all a collective kick up the pants and open our eyes and hearts and minds and hopes and all of those things to - oh my goodness we have work to do here - let's organize ourselves to do that work.

Their brief is to challenge the church. I should tell you a little story. I did go to a Sydney Presbytery event a long time ago - couple of years ago - called "no retreat". And there were two speakers, one of whom was Malcolm Turnbull and the other was Tanya Plibersek. And I asked them both the question when they had finished. I asked them what they thought the church's work in the world was now. Malcolm Turnbull couldn't answer that question but Tanya Plibersek absolutely took it on - and she gave me what for!

So here I am. This is what we're going to do.

The other good thing about Synod is that the new Principal of UTC, Reverend Peter Walker, will be leading the bible studies and inviting us to think about what it means to claim life in this living God who's invited us to live church for our times. So Peter is always worth listening to.

And the one thing I particularly want to talk to you about is that there will be three public events at this Synod meeting - to which the whole church across - as many who can get there - are invited. So I've actually brought you a poster and I've got ten, so if you want a poster, you can you can take it. I tried to bring a big one but I couldn't make it print.

So one of those events will be a screening of the new documentary "Half a Million Steps" - which is based on the decision of a previous Synod to engage in a serious harm minimization campaign, and the long walk to treatment - which you must have heard about. This video, this documentary is pulling all of that together, so that will be a not-to-be-missed event.

On the Saturday night, and I really hate this name, but I'm stuck with it, there's an event called Revivify. It used to be called "*Many Cultures, One in Christ*" and I actually understand that. Revivify is sort of a bit odd. So that will be a very energetic high-powered, hopefully empowering worship event, featuring lots of young people, lots of possibly noise and enthusiasm for the work of this church that's another one.

And finally at the end of Synod there will be the Synod Closing Worship. And that also is a public event. Now don't ask me how to do this, but apparently, if you grab one of these posters, and if you do something with your phone in relation to that thing, it will tell you what you need to do to register for these events. I've got no idea how to do that. But anyway.

Some of the proposals that are coming to Synod - I told you that you are going to get a Synod ra ra. Some of the proposals are quite bold for our church in my experience. There is a paper coming to the church, to the Synod about what it means to be a growing church. Now in my experience in the Uniting Church, we get a bit phobic about growth. I don't think I've ever been in a Synod where we've had *what does it mean to be a growing church* on our agenda - and I think that's really exciting.

What sort of leadership do we need for the church in our times and what's the shape of that? What might our advocacy priorities be? How are we going to engage in the public space from the story that we live, creation humans in the image of God for the sake of the world? And also there's Josh, as I said, who's going to provoke us to think about what might be our climate action priorities as a whole church. Many of those Synod events will be live streamed - and again - don't ask me how to do this. But they'll be accessible online and I'm pretty sure they won't be boring. So that's enough promotion.

Let's think about Elijah, who seems to have got himself into a bit of a mess.

In the name of God blessing us changing us calling us. Amen.

So Elijah has been a very busy boy. By the time we catch up with him, on the run, hiding out in the desert.

So, on a word from the Lord, Elijah has stopped the rain and the dew and plunged the land into drought, thereby arousing the anger of the King, Ahab, who finds himself powerless to do anything about it.

So Elijah has upset the political establishment and exposed them as being not as powerful as they like to be thought.

And then, on another word from the Lord, he's taken himself off to spend time with the widow of Zarephath - and there he's blessed her and her son with life. And bear in mind that these poor nameless widows and others like them weren't proper people.

Their survival or otherwise was a matter of indifference to economic movers and shakers and the powers that be. But Elijah has gone and committed acts of life.

And then, on yet another word from the Lord, he's taken on the priests and the prophets of Baal, about 850 of them on my count, which is quite a lot. And he took them on to play a game of My God is Bigger than Your God.

And Elijah won that contest in dramatic fashion. And in doing so, of course, he's completely upset the religious establishment.

And then finally, the king's wife, Jezebel, has taken it all very personally and she's promised to come after him.

I suspect that Jezebel was also ticked off with Ahab for letting Elijah get the better of him, but the text is a bit silent on that. So actually it's no surprise that Elijah got the wind up and headed out into the desert.

So what's going on here?

What's going on is the political, social, economic, religious establishment that thought, as these things do, thought they had everything nicely under control. Thought they had it so designed and managed to ensure that the proper people prospered at the expense of - well - the rest. And a system in which everyone else is virtually terrorized into submission and forced to melt into the shadows - that's the world. I read somewhere this week that Baalism is a religion that believes that the mystery of life has now been put at our disposal and that we can have life on any terms that we like.

I didn't realize that Baalism was so contemporary but evidently.

So the world of the powers that be in Elijah's time is a very cosy world; it's secure, it's closed, it's a bubble if you like, and what Elijah has done is come along and stick a pin in it.

You'd have to agree that the thing with the priests of Baal was pretty spectacular.

Elijah prays and fire falls from the skies and consumes the burnt offering - the wood the stones and the dust - and even licked up the water that was in the trench. And then the rains come and presumably the drought ends. And Ahab trudges home drenched, with a very sorry tale for Jezebel who, as I said takes it very personally. So Elijah heads into the desert.

It can be very scary when God turns up.

It sounds as though he's gone for fear of Jezebel, but it could easily be a fear of God. My goodness the word from the Lord has done these things, has changed this world in these ways. That's a scary thing.

It's a very technical story - and I do remember it being a Sunday school favourite, particularly among boys. I think they like the bit about putting them to death with the sword.

But actually the world that Elijah speaks into and disrupts is very familiar - don't you think? It's very familiar. Scarily familiar.

I've always thought Ahab was a bit of a buffoon, a bit of a cartoon character. I'm not so sure anymore.

Now you'll all have your own examples. But think a bit about the political rhetoric that we've heard over the last week about the absolutely terrible threat that the Medevac Bill poses to Australia's national security.

Really!

Think about the ways that people, vulnerable people, are demonized in that rhetoric.

We need to keep our national security stitched up tight so that the widows, in this case sick people, can be kept out of sight and out of mind. And we need to make this a story about security and not let it become a story about humanity or compassion or any of those things.

Well then, think about the Menindee fish disaster. Think of the whole Murray Darling Basin disaster and the rhetoric associated with that. Australia is a land that seems to spend more time in drought than out of it. Why do we need to grow thirsty crops like cotton? Farmers usually get cross with me at this point but I don't know the answer to that question.

An awful lot of effort in our world right now goes into polishing the dominant story, getting it out there discrediting any opposition, controlling the media. Oh I know let's raid the ABC.

An equally large effort goes into engendering fear, provoking anxiety and providing social soporifics to reward people for not noticing humanity or ecological rape or whatever.

Yes the story, the Elijah story is bloodthirsty and we get a bit squeamish about bloody biblical stories. If there were 850 prophets of Baal that Elijah put to death by sword in the Wadi Kishon. That's an awful bloodbath. That's a lot of people.

But is it actually any worse than the horrendous number of men women and children who are dying of neglect and despair in refugee camps, including our very own, all around the world - is it actually worse than that? The scale of our own humanitarian disaster is simply staggering. It's an obscenity and it's very real.

So my question then is: *where is God in all of this?* What's God up to - and even Elijah appears to be concerned.

But as I thought about it, what Elijah has done, on the strength of a word from the Lord, with all of these theatrics, is to commit acts of life in a world defined by death.

Stopping and starting the rain means that the Ahab regime is not actually in control. Sharing food with the shadow people on the edges of the world means that, my goodness, there is actually enough. Raising the boy to life means that death is not the last word and the future is possible and coming.

All that Elijah does, the only thing he does really, in the face of the dominant royal priestly narrative is to say: *I believe in God - and I speak from that reality!* Elijah speaks from an alternative reality and says: *I believe in God and because of that* - dah dah dah.

He asserts the sovereignty of God. He tells a different story. He lives a different possibility and in doing so a new future becomes possible. It doesn't sound like much and it's not very religious and it's not terribly pious. But that *I believe in God* has changed and keeps changing the world. Think of those African slaves who first read the story of Exodus and then acted to make it their own story as well. *I believe in God who can bring life out of the out of death.*

And so for us today, in a church 42 years old, that did start out with great fanfare but which seems to have lost some of its mojo in recent years, it's my belief that we need to stop the lament. We need to wake up to the task and challenge of being the bearers of that disruptive word into our world.

That our world is a world which appears to be dealing out life sentences to millions of people, and surrendering the planet which we claim to be God's good creation - and it seems to be doing that - it's a deep mystery to me. But it seems to be doing that for the sake of short term political and economic expedience. This is not OK. We have a different story and we need to tell that story.

And to do that, I think, we do need to get our heads and our hearts around something that we get very coy about in the Uniting Church.

I'll pre-empt what's bound to happen later on; somebody will say: *ahh, Jane it's not about bums on seats.*

Yeah, actually it is. We're great at talking about decline and we're great at declining, but when it comes to growth, we're so busy trying to dissociate ourselves from - I don't know what - Sydney Anglicanism or something - that we never get anywhere. We never do the work we need to do to pass on this story; to pass on this disruptive word so that it continues to make its way in the world and commit acts of life for the sake of the humans in this creation.

This disruptive word goes through disruptive humans like Elijah. Like the other prophets. Like John the Baptist. Like Jesus. Like countless faithful people through millennia - and you have a very proud tradition in this church of proclaiming a disruptive word.

The impetus to witness and to act with that word comes from engagement with the real issues of the day. Real issues of marginality and power and sovereignty. Life and death issues that we all face.

Hands up who's got grandchildren?

Hands up who spends time worrying about the future that their grandchildren will inherit?

Absolutely we have a word that can change that. We need to pass that word on so that it can continue to do its work. And in fact Elijah's next job after he's dusted himself off and had an encounter with the still small voice, his next job is to pass the word on, to find his successor, to gather someone else into the task of bearing this story into the future.

And I have said many times, *that if the Uniting Church did not exist God would have to invent it.* Of all the churches in the Australian cultural landscape, the Uniting Church is the one most likely to pick up the mantle of Elijah and to carry that disruptive word into the future. And all Elijah said is: *I believe in God.* I don't believe in Ahab as friends. I believe in God. All we need to do is say and live: *we believe in God* and get on with offering that disruptive word into the public space.

Let's do it.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.