

Choose Justice

1 Kings 21:1-21a

June 13, 2010; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

Sometimes the Bible gives us proverbs, sometimes parables, sometimes dreams, sometimes lectures, sometimes lists, sometimes psalms, and sometimes just simple stories. And that is what we hear today – a simple story.

I imagine that it's not one that many of us find familiar, even though its themes of jealousy and justice are familiar. King Ahab is a pretty unknown Biblical figure. In fact, if there was ever a Jeopardy type game show question, I imagine far more people would identify the Captain Ahab figure from the novel Moby-Dick.

Jezebel, however, is another story. I think for many of us it is a name we know, even if we can't quite place the original story. And again, I would imagine far more people would come up with Bettie Davis wearing that "scandalous" red dress in the 1938 movie Jezebel for which she won an academy award.

But today King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are part of the Biblical narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures. They exemplify pretty clearly the problems that can come with too much greed accompanied by too much power. And they aren't alone. Earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures King David sees Bathsheba bathing on a neighboring rooftop, and has her husband killed in an unnecessary battle so he can have her as his trophy wife.

But today King Ahab is coveting an olive orchard. And that itself – olive trees – is an important part of the story. Olives, olive oil, and therefore olive trees are an important resource in the entire Mediterranean world. In the hills of Palestine they are on carefully tended terraces, with rock walls ringing the hills for miles and miles. They are important to the economy, certainly, but they are also treated with great care and respect. Different olives and olive oils are produced from different regions and family traditions, and they are spoken of much like the nuances of fine wines from a particular region or valley.

So to request that your olive orchard, your family inheritance and income and future, be given over even for a fair payment, would be resisted by anyone. Replacing it with a common vegetable garden that could be planted anywhere wouldn't be all that different than a Napa Valley vintner being asked to give up a long standing vineyard for a Wal-Mart parking lot. The person receiving the request would be insulted.

But that is what happens in this story. Ahab wants it all and he wants it now. Doesn't that sound familiar? And then, in a very un-kinglike way, he pouts about it when he doesn't get what he wants. The narrative states: *"He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat."*

And then Jezebel gets involved and goes to work. She is clearly a no-nonsense type of woman, let alone one who is willing to have some one killed just to get what she wants. And maybe even more chilling, there is nothing in the story to indicate that she cares about or wants a vegetable garden one way or the other. But Ahab wants it, and that's enough for her. Naboth the Jezreelite is stubborn and in the way, so he has to go.

And you have to wonder about this ancient marriage relationship – Ahab the gardener who pouts and maybe even subtly manipulates Jezebel to take matters in hand and solve the problem. And Jezebel who is quite comfortable handling matters of state and intrigue while her husband pouts in the bedroom. Especially in the context of that time, they had their traditional male and female roles reversed.

And it might be intentional to the story. For in addition to dishonoring the land and killing your neighbor, some commentaries tell us that there was probably a sub-text about marrying a foreign woman. Jezebel was from Tyre, a coastal city in present-day Lebanon, and back then outside of the boundaries of the tribes of ancient Israel. There was a Hebrew prohibition against men marrying women from outside of the nation, and this story is included in the Biblical narrative as an example of what happens when a foreign, head-strong woman, and one who still worships the Canaanite gods no less, is given privilege and power.

And the theme of disapproval of interfaith marriage still echoes on into the present day. In traditional and conservative contemporary Judaism there is still the practice of a Gentile needing to convert before marrying a Jew, and the refusal of some Rabbis to officiate a wedding when the Gentile – man or woman – does not wish to convert.

But the dominant theme of today's Biblical story is about justice. And that finally comes forth when the prophet Elijah the Tishbite is introduced. He is given the unenviable job of speaking truth to power.

Justice. It's a big deal. And the word is used all over the map. Criminal justice. Scales of justice. Distributive justice. The U.S. Department of Justice. Environmental justice. Social justice. Restorative justice. Peace with justice, and the accompanying term of a "just peace" as opposed to a "just war."

It is a philosophical concept, a religious ideal, and a practice of governments and social institutions. And when it involves retribution or punishment, it can always run the risk of becoming vengeance.

In the Biblical story justice is not sought out by Naboth's relatives – the family who will not receive their ancestral inheritance, and who would have no power against their King and Queen – but by God. And that is a powerful idea. It is a departure from the phrase that we hear so often "God helps those who help themselves." Contrary to popular belief, this phrase is NOT in the Bible. It is attributed to Aesop of Aesop's Fables and to Benjamin Franklin. And it isn't some self-serving free market slogan, but was about the value of work and the idea that each of us can always do something. In the Biblical

narrative, God does something quite different – over and over again and illustrated in today’s story – God helps those who cannot help themselves. God seeks justice.

And yet, justice as it is eventually found in today’s Biblical story about Ahab and Jezebel and Naboth and Elijah is over such an ultimately sad thing. Ahab and Jezebel have all that they need and more – but because of greed and power and maybe too much time on their hands – it isn’t enough. Wouldn’t it truly be wonderful if the world could actually learn the exercise that we experienced today in the children’s time? Turning the things that we want and that make us sad, into being grateful for the things that we do have and practicing being happy.

Our two hymns today bookend this Biblical story about justice. The first one is a prayer of hope, stating: “O for a world where everyone respects each other’s ways, where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise.”

And our last hymn is a prayer that also is partly a call to action, stating: “We can be love, we can bring peace, we can still be [God’s] way of compassion.”

And whether through prayer or action or a little bit of both – justice is ultimately a verb. We say no to Ahab and Jezebel. We honor Elijah. We pay tribute to and grieve over Naboth. We believe into hope. We practice being happy. We choose and act on justice.

May it be so – yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Amen.

1 Kings 21:1-21a

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it;' but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death." The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead." As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?" You shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you...."