

Today we heard the 2<sup>nd</sup> of our 5 week series of Old Testament lessons about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Today we heard about King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and their illegal and immoral seizure of Naboth's vineyard.

I'm shocked by this story. And what I find most shocking is that I know I'm supposed to be shocked by this story. Yet I find I'm not as shocked as I should be. And that's shocking. Perhaps I'm so used to stories about the powerful taking what they want by force that I've become jaded and deadened to the shock of this story. That tells me it's probably a worthwhile thing to take a deeper look at it: 1Kings ch21 (bulletins).

We're introduced to a new character in v1: Naboth, from Jezreel. Jezreel is an area of fertile farmland just south of Nazareth. It's still the most important agricultural area in Israel.

We're told in v1 that Naboth has a vineyard, and it's next to King Ahab's palace. Actually this would have been Ahab's 2<sup>nd</sup> palace. His main palace was in the mountains. This second palace on the warmer plains would have been a winter refuge from the cold.

v2 Ahab says 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."

To us this sounds completely reasonable. Naboth, you can trade up. You can have a better vineyard. Or you can cash out. Your choice. Sounds like a great deal. Sounds like a no-brainer.

When I was in seminary, I did my field-ed at a church that used to be in a small, falling apart building. One day in the 1980s, a representative from Burger King came along and said, "We want this corner. Here's 2 million dollars if you'll get lost." The church took the money in a heartbeat, and went out and built a much better facility elsewhere that allowed their congregation to triple in size. It was pretty much a no brainer.

But Ahab's offer to Naboth is only a no brainer for our culture. There are a number of ancient cultural factors that are off our radar screen. In fact, for a good Jew in 900 BC this offer would have been a no brainer, but it would have been a no brainer in the opposite direction. There's no way Naboth should have, or even could have, accepted this offer.

First off, God was very clear. When he brought the Jewish people into the promised land, he divided the land between all of the tribes and families. But God wanted the people to remember it was his land. It was his gift to them. They were just using it temporarily. They did not have title to it. In fact, the law was crystal clear. God states in Leviticus:

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 25:23

So even if Naboth had wanted to sell the land, he had no right to. The most he could have done would be to lease it temporarily to Ahab.

Now, this seems strange to us. After all, we have games like "Monopoly" where you buy and sell and trade land at a young age. But in an agrarian economy, the land was everything. The land was the only security your family had. No land, no food, no way to provide for yourself. It was to be passed down from generation to generation. And generation after generation would be buried there as well.

If Naboth had accepted Ahab's offer, he would have betrayed his ancestors, he would have betrayed his descendants, and he would have disobeyed God's direct command. That makes for a no-brainer.

But there's something else that's a bit more subtle, but also important. In v2, we're told that Ahab wanted to take the vineyard and turn it into a vegetable garden. That seems pretty innocuous to us. But it's a loaded term. The only other time in the Bible that the word for "vegetable garden" is used, it's a negative term to describe what foreigners do. The Egyptians grew vegetables because they irrigated their farmland. But in the promised land, the children of Israel were supposed to trust God to water their crops.

As God tells them in Deuteronomy,  
"The land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land... watered by rain from the sky, a land that the LORD your God looks after."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, don't try to grow water intensive crops. Practice dry-land farming with crops that will grow naturally. Don't try to artificially grow cucumbers and melons and onions. Grow grapes, olives, wheat, barley, dates, and trust God to provide rain for you.

Naboth's vineyard is eco-friendly, and trusts in God. Ahab's proposed vegetable garden is water intensive, and ignores God. By requesting Naboth's vineyard, King Ahab shows that he has little regard for Israel's God or Israel's laws. And Naboth shows that he is simply trying to do what God commands.

v3 Naboth says to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

v4 We see Ahab go into a major pout—he goes home "resentful and sullen." He lays down on his bed, puts his face to the wall, and refuses to eat.

v5 Enter Queen Jezebel. She's a tough, take-charge lady. She demands to know why Ahab is sulking. v7 She takes a jab at Ahab. "Do you now govern Israel?" Are you still the king? Last time I checked, I thought you were the king.

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<sup>2</sup> Deut 11:10-12a

v8, She sends out orders in husband's name. To make a long story short, she sets Naboth up so he will be lynched on false charges. And her plan works.

By v15 Naboth is dead. We also learn later that all of his children are killed as well.<sup>3</sup> To Jezebel, it's all in a day's work. Middle of v15, she tells Ahab to take possession of the vineyard, and in v16 he does.

At this point, v18 God tells the prophet Elijah, "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."

Notice, in God's eyes, it's still Naboth's vineyard.

v19 Is the judgment: "Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood." Ahab's crimes have not escaped God notice. Ahab's crimes will not go unanswered or unpunished.

Neither will Jezebel's. A few verses later, a similar fate is predicted for her.

Later, they will both come to a rather gruesome end in a dynastic struggle, just as it had been prophesied and described by Elijah.

The bottom line lesson for Ahab, Jewish kings did not have unlimited power. If they overstepped their bounds, there was a controlling legal authority. God did step in to make things right.

Now the lessons for us are myriad.

The story of Naboth's vineyard shows us how dangerous sin is, how one sin left unchecked and unrepented can escalate into worse forms of sin.

In many ways, the story starts out as commentary on the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment: "You shall not covet."

But Ahab's coveting, and Jezebel's complicity, lead others to into the conspiracy, and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Commandments go by the wayside as well: You shall not bear false witness. You shall not murder.

But at the bottom, these crimes take place because the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandments have been ignored: "You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any idol."

At heart, this is a warning about idolatry, about putting anything in the place of God.

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<sup>3</sup> 2Kings 9:26

Naboth placed God first. He turned down a lucrative offer from the king in order to obey God's commands. He took a financial hit in order to do the right thing. Wicked and evil people even took his life, but he was faithful to God and his commandments.

Our choices are rarely made in a vacuum. They usually ripple out and have repercussions for others. And our choices are rarely morally neutral. They often come down to serving others or serving ourselves. They often come down to a choice of doing things God's way or our way.

How will you choose?

Who will you follow?