

## **NAME YOUR PRICE**

The Bible teaches us in many different ways, sometimes using sermons and laws or even what might seem like lectures, but perhaps the best way it teaches is through stories. This week's Hebrew Bible text is a story about one of the prophets raised up in Israel to speak truth to power whenever necessary. We know that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are a most degenerative royal couple. Today, Jezebel would probably be called a sociopath, and at best, Ahab would be seen as her enabler. Together, they represent unbridled power and the prophet Elijah is the one who speaks honest and painful truth to them.

The story is perhaps too familiar: those with power and wealth – in this case, King Ahab of Israel and his Sidonian wife, Jezebel – want what they have no right to demand, even as king and queen. Ahab lives in Samaria, his capital city, and visits his winter palace in Jezreel, where he sees the vineyard of his next-door neighbor, Naboth, and lusts after it. He would love to turn it into a vegetable garden. At first, his offer to buy the vineyard seems perfectly reasonable and fair, rather ordinary to us. "Name your price," Ahab says to Naboth, because he really, really wants that vineyard. Unfortunately for the king, Naboth lives not by the rule of the highest price but by the law of God, and refuses to sell his land.

The law Naboth is bound by is written in Leviticus, chapter 25: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.* God is the real owner. The people who received it long before – after their liberation from slavery and their journey to the promised land – hold it in trust as stewards of God's gifts – not just to them but to their descendants after them. Naboth simply can not sell his vineyard to the king and remain faithful to God. He remembers what Ahab is trying to forget.

The mention of liberation from slavery recalls the story of the people of Israel in Egypt, and those who first heard this story might have detected something between the lines – there may be a sinister symbolic meaning to Ahab's desire to change Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden – a meaning that we are not sensitive to in our own time and place. In various ancient texts Israel is referred to as vineyard, and Egypt as vegetable plot. Those early listeners may have experienced a degree of horror at the image of a vegetable garden – Ahab is a king that wants to transform God's land into a land of bondage. Why sell what God has given you to go back to slavery?

Naboth's vineyard is an ancient but enduring illustration that illuminates God's desire for the creation to live in harmony within God's grace – it reveals an influential person's tragic failure to use power for good rather than for selfish ends. This little drama has a great cast of characters: **Ahab**, the outwardly successful but privately sulking self indulgent king of Israel – **Jezebel**, unmoved by the law engraved on the hearts of Ahab's people except to use it as a tool to accomplish her own purposes – **Naboth**, the faithful small land owner – **Elijah**, the passionate prophet out of the desert.

As we look more closely at the people in this story, think about who these characters might represent today. How is the tragedy of their story played out in our society? What can we learn about how we are to live? What values are we called to proclaim? How might we be condemned through our action or inaction? Who or what is our god?

**Naboth** is a simple righteous man who farms his land with integrity and tries to keep the law of Moses. He is in a long line of ancient and faithful people who understand the meaning of covenant, even if Ahab tries to forget such things. In the standoff between Naboth and the king, we see covenantal ways colliding with human power and initiative unfounded in covenantal concerns about justice, compassion, and shalom. The judicial, political, and religious systems fail to protect an honorable man.

Israelite kings did not have absolute rights because they ruled as stewards under God – as guardians and protectors – anointed to serve God and to serve the people of God in the way they governed. So when Naboth refuses to sell his land, Ahab accepts his right to refuse – he doesn't like it, but he accepts it.

The vineyard that Naboth refuses to part with is not really his to sell – it is the hereditary property of his family – belongs to all generations, past and future, to secure the livelihood of the family. If someone was forced to sell because of poverty, that person's relatives were obliged to make every effort to buy the property back again – this was to prevent the creation of a dispossessed class who would become enslaved to the wealthy. So Naboth is only entitled to sell under specific circumstances – there is a strong constraint on him not to do so – and Ahab knows it.

**Ahab** was King of Israel at Samaria in the Northern Kingdom a few generations after the division of the united nation of David and Solomon. He reigned for about 20 years and was known as an influential military and political figure throughout the region. His marriage to Jezebel was a political arrangement to cement an alliance between Israel and the Phoenician kingdom of Sidon in joint defence against a common enemy.

This alliance was very profitable in trade. The economy was good and Ahab was described as the builder of many cities, but despite his apparent successes Ahab was seen to be weak and unreliable. He often sought approval from advisers who would try to make themselves popular by telling him what he wanted to hear. That weakness eventually led to his downfall when he went to war on the advice of those who wished to please him and against the better advice of a true prophet of the Lord.

Ahab makes a request that he knows is dishonest and disrespectful – he has no right to Naboth's vineyard and no legitimate recourse when Naboth says no. Ahab is annoyed, resentful and sullen. Ahab offends both God and God's people because this is not simply a story of Naboth's private, personal property rights being violated. This is about God and God's attentive care for those beneath the high and mighty, those who are nevertheless very much on the mind of God. That's where those laws come from: the mind – and heart – of God, so Ahab offends God when he treats Naboth unjustly.

**Jezebel** came from Tyre, the Phoenician city on the coast which was a centre of international trade across the Mediterranean. Phoenicia was among the most technically and economically advanced societies in the world at that time. Some elements of its culture have come down to us, mainly through the Greeks. The alphabet we use was developed from Phoenician writing.

Jezebel was the daughter of a king who had quite different views about monarchy than the Israelites. Her view of an oriental monarch was that they should act with ruthless devotion to absolute rights. When Ahab reports what has happened with Naboth, the queen is contemptuous.

Jezebel sets a conspiracy in motion – uses God’s law to commit murder – frames Naboth using the sycophants in the court and criminals in the society. She usurps the authority of Ahab by using his name on the letters – trumps up charges against Naboth – seals his fate with the seal of the king. The judicial, political, and religious systems are exactly what the scheming queen employs to get what her husband wants.

The bonus for Ahab is that everything appears aboveboard and he doesn’t have to do a thing himself. Once Naboth is safely dead, Jezebel sends Ahab off to enjoy his new acquisition, and there is not even one word of questioning or concern from the king about how she has accomplished what she had challenged him to do.

When Ahab goes to claim the vineyard, **Elijah** turns up unexpectedly, right there in the vineyard to greet the king with a warning from the Lord. Elijah challenges him saying, “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” In essence it is Ahab, not Jezebel, who kills Naboth.

Elijah is a man of God separated from the power and wealth of a prosperous ruling class. He has been driven out of his country to live in poverty and isolation in a desert cave. In the way he lives he is a friend of the poor and the vulnerable. In spite of sure punishment he dares to speak out against the king and idolatry.

Elijah is a great figure remembered for the truth and power with which he spoke for God and the strong sense of justice his prophecy represented. Ahab respected and feared the prophet Elijah who seems to have been one of the few people with the courage to tell him the way things were whether he liked it or not.

When Elijah calls the king out on what he has done, he also warns him of the consequences of his actions, and it is here that our text for the day ends, although there is much more to the story – it doesn’t end only in violent death, greed, and appropriation. As following chapters tell us in gruesome detail, it was not long before Ahab went to war again – against the advice of another prophet of the Lord – and died in his chariot.

What have Ahab and Jezebel to do with us? The consequences for Ahab’s actions are the same as those that came to earlier kings Jeroboam and Baasha for having made other gods for themselves and their people. What is the nature of the gods we are tempted to worship? Personal Gain – Political Power – Economic Security – Minding our own Business

What are the consequences of devotion to these gods?

Why is Naboth’s story important today? It was recorded for our benefit. Through the story God reveals how we should treat one another – demonstrates divine understanding of the value of rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The story informs us about how people suffer when they do not relate to each other in the way that God desires.

The issues raised in the passage are still issues today: What limits should there be on the power of government? Is it honorable to take away land rights? Is commercial consideration the most important consideration? Can we simply *name our price*? How do we respond to crafty business practices that seem to cheat weaker members of our society? How do we ensure that human life is valued and protected? What do we say to those who promote prosperity at the expense of human welfare?

Today the powerful and rich can still take away from the poor the little that they have – it happens in our nation – it happens within and among nations around the world. And like Ahab, though we didn't *set the conspiracy in motion* – as we stand by and let others do things that benefit us while hurting others, we participate in wrongdoing all the same. We may wish it weren't true, but the story of Ahab teaches that God is allied with the poor against the wealthy – with those who choose God's freedom over the slavery of the world. That is who God is and no royal wishing will have it otherwise. We may not have the power of kings and queens, but we do have some power – more than we suppose – and with that power comes the responsibility to use it for good and not for our own selfish ends, individually or collectively.

This is a warning about the use and misuse of power in society that invites us to remember that Jesus calls the least among us the greatest – tells us that the last shall be first – judges our love of God by our care for one another.

The story of Ahab and Jezebel and Naboth and Elijah reminds us that our actions – and our complacency – have consequences, and all of this matters to God.

Israel is called *God's vineyard*. This story is not only about misused power or Naboth's property and vulnerability. This also a story of hope. No matter what is happening around us or within us, deeper still is the reality of God at work in our lives, and the dream of God for the life of the world. We are *God's vineyard*, and even when such vineyard has been stomped, burned, robbed, and the night of despair seems long and unending – grace conquers evil power – joy comes in the morning.

We keep on hoping – not based on events currently engulfing us – but on what we have experienced from God in the past. God's justice will flourish. Remember the goodness of God in your own story. Good overcomes evil, mercy overcomes pain – at the end, as with Jesus, life overcomes death.

Grace – Jesus – is the vine, and we are the branches. Wine of joy will come. Rest in that hope. **Amen**