

“Unequal Partners”

1 Kings 21: 1 – 21

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian

June 13, 2010

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<sup>1</sup>Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. <sup>2</sup>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.”

<sup>3</sup>But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

<sup>4</sup>Ahab went home resentful & 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 & would not eat.

<sup>5</sup>His wife Jezebel came to him & said, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?”

<sup>6</sup>He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite & 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.’”

<sup>7</sup>His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Arise, eat some food & be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

<sup>8</sup>So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name & sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders & the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. <sup>9</sup>She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast & seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; <sup>10</sup>seat two scoundrels opposite him & have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God & the king.’ Then take him out & stone him to death.”

<sup>11</sup>The men of his city, the elders & 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, <sup>12</sup>they proclaimed a fast & seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. <sup>13</sup>The two scoundrels came in & sat opposite him; & the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God & the king.”

So they took him outside the city & stoned him to death. <sup>14</sup>Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.”

<sup>15</sup>As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned & 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.”

<sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: <sup>18</sup>Arise, 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. <sup>19</sup>You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed & 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.”

<sup>20</sup>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, <sup>21</sup>I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you & will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel.

This ends our reading.

Now the story we're going to look at this morning has four main characters. First is Naboth, a good & Godly man, a man who worshiped the Lord & followed the law of his God. He was one of the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. It happened that he owned a vineyard next to the summer palace of wicked king Ahab. We may assume that up until this day there had never been any trouble between Naboth & Ahab. So far as we know Ahab had paid no attention to Naboth & Naboth had done whatever he needed to do to stay out of the way of the wicked king. But on this day Ahab sees Naboth's vineyard & decides he wants it. Ahab's desire is so strong to own this vineyard that it overrides his knowledge of God's laws set in scripture & sets in motion a disastrous chain of events.

The second character is the wild-hearted prophet Elijah; a rough & complex mountain man whose faith provides us with powerful & important lessons.

The third key player is Ahab. About him we need only to say what we heard last Sunday, that no more wicked king ever sat upon the throne of Israel. Holy Scripture declares that he more than any other man imported the worship of Baal into Israel. For that there is a black mark over his name. Ahab is the king, though I think it would be fair to say his life & his mind are really controlled by the fourth character in this story.

Her name is Jezebel. If Ahab was a wicked toad squatting on the throne of Israel, then Jezebel was an evil snake coiled around the throne. She was not Jewish. She was a pagan woman. She came from a long line of Baal worshippers. When she marries Ahab, she brings her religion to Israel. And I suppose we should say this; between Ahab & Jezebel if we had to pick who was worse, we would end up saying that Ahab was weak & she was strong. Ahab was easily influenced & she was ready to push her husband in the wrong direction.

So far we've got Naboth who owns the vineyard, a Godly man, a common man, a workingman, a man who appears here & here only on the pages of the Bible. Then we have Ahab the king & Queen Jezebel his wife.

And fourth, is God's mountain man, Elijah the Tishbite. Since his great victory on Mount Carmel & then his humiliating running away to the cave in Mount Horeb, Elijah hasn't been heard from for three years. The Bible doesn't tell us what he's been doing for those three years. Now Elijah will return.

Our story this morning begins on that day in Jezreel when king Ahab looks at the vineyard of Naboth & says to himself, "I'm the king of Israel. I need this vineyard & I want this vineyard for myself."

So Ahab goes to Naboth & says “Would you please sell your vineyard to me? If you will not sell your vineyard to me, would you please trade it? I am the king. If you will give me your vineyard I will give you another piece of land here in Israel that is worth much more.”

I pause here to say the king was within his rights to do this. He had every right to go to Naboth. He did not sin by making the offer. It was a legitimate thing for Ahab to do. However, he didn't count on the fact that Naboth was a man of God who followed the law of God. Here is Naboth's reply to the king: “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

One simple sentence. Those are the only recorded words of Naboth, but they tell us all we need to know. Naboth was a man who respected God. He was a man who respected God's word. Naboth was a man who respected his own spiritual heritage.

He refused to sell the vineyard because Naboth knew his religious history. In multiple books of the Bible; in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Leviticus it says that when a family had been given a plot of land, it was to be handed down from generation to generation. It was never to be sold. It was to be in the hands of the family forever. That was God's command.

So Naboth says to the king, “The Lord forbid that I should do anything that should dishonor my family’s inheritance & break the law of my God.”

In other words, “No deal, O King. Sorry but I can’t do business with you.”

The king upset & humiliated & angry goes back to his palace in a big stinky funk. “So Ahab went home resentful & angry because Naboth, had said, ‘I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.’ Ahab lay on his bed sulking & refused to eat.”

In other words the king threw a fit. When the queen asks why he is so grouchy, he replies, “Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, ‘Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.’ But Naboth said, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’”

Ahab neglects to tell his wife the real reason—that Naboth wouldn’t sell because he wouldn’t violate the law of God. And Jezebel doesn’t know the laws of God, because she’s a pagan. So Jezebel hatches this plan. “Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I’ll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

So Jezebel writes a letter in the name of the king. She forges his name, although I suppose you can’t really call it forgery because he knows what she’s doing. She composes the letter & sends it to the elders of the town.

The text of the letter she wrote is in the Bible. We heard Krista read it a moment ago. “Proclaim a day of fasting & seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him & have them testify that he has cursed both God & the king. Then take him out & stone him to death.” We call this a kangaroo court, a set up from the get go.

“So the elders & nobles who lived in Naboth’s city did as Jezebel directed.”

The whole city had become so corrupt that the so-called spiritual leaders, who know the ten commandments; “thou shall not murder” and “thou shall not bear false witness; instead of protesting this evil plot, go along with Jezebel’s plan.

And it gets worse: “They proclaimed a fast.” Can you imagine that? A fast was to be to God. “They proclaimed a fast & they sat Naboth in a prominent place among the people.”

That doesn’t mean they’re about to give him a prize. That means he’s about to be sentenced. “Then two scoundrels came & brought charges against him saying, ‘Naboth has cursed both God & the king.’” Complete lies.

“So they took him outside the city & stoned him to death.”

Jezebel sends word to the king that the vineyard is now his. We find out later in 2 Kings that they also kill Naboth's two sons, leaving no living heirs, which means the land now reverts to the crown. When Ahab saw that the land was his, he smiled.

It appears that the king & his wife have gotten away with murder. And we wonder, "Where is God? Does God not know? Does God care? Where is God when a man of God is killed for doing right? Where is God when the wicked rise to power? Where is God when a man like Ahab & a woman like Jezebel can get away with murder? Where is God when evil is let loose in the world?"

But this isn't the end of the story. I remember from Sunday school this verse from Proverbs "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked & the good." God's been watching. Now God is about to act.

God goes to the prophet Elijah, pats him on the shoulder & tells him to head for Jezreel. In the Hebrew version Jezebel tells Ahab to "Arise" & go take the vineyard & now God uses the same word to Elijah. "Arise, prophet of God, I have a job for you to do."

Three long years have passed since the last time the prophet spoke in public. I don't know if Elijah wondered if God had put him on the shelf.

Perhaps Elijah feared that his running away had caused God to give up on him. Maybe he thought his days of prophesying were over. But then God says to Elijah, “Arise. Arise & go find that wicked king. Deliver a message from me.”

God tells Elijah to go down to Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria and say, “This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man & taken his property?”

Then say to Ahab, “This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood.”

When Elijah delivers his message, he adds an interesting phrase: “I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD.”

The Hebrew word translated “sold yourself” has a secondary meaning—which means “to marry.” Elijah is saying to Ahab, “You have married evil, & in marrying evil you have given yourself completely to it.”

There will be disaster in Ahab’s family, his dynasty will come to an end & dogs will consume Jezebel. The dogs will feed on those who die in the city, the birds will eat the flesh of those who die in the country.

Elijah delivers this message & disappears. This seems to be a pattern with him. He just shows up, delivers his message & then he’s gone.

Days turn into weeks. Weeks turn into months. Ahab doesn't hear from Elijah again. But don't you imagine every time Ahab hears a dog bark, he jumps. I think he never gets it out of his mind.

One day Ahab decides he wants to go to war again against Ben-Hadad, the defeated king of Syria. Now Ahab's going to go to war against him a second time, only this time it's not going to work out so well. He asks Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to join him in his war against Ben-Hadad. Jehoshaphat agrees & the day comes when they are ready to go to battle. Knowing that he is a marked man, Ahab tells Jehoshaphat to go to battle dressed as a king & he (Ahab) will go out dressed as a common soldier. What Ahab didn't know was that Ben-Hadad had given a very unusual order to his army. He told his army to concentrate only on killing Ahab. When the battle starts, the Syrians spot Jehoshaphat & are about to kill him, thinking he's Ahab. Suddenly someone shouted, "We've got the wrong king."

In the confusion of battle, one of the Syrian archers shoots an arrow at random. He's not aiming at anything. He sees the army of Israel & twang, releases an arrow toward them. Ahab was dressed in armor like a regular soldier. The arrow just "happened" to come down & hit Ahab. The Bible says it hit between the sections of his armor. It's more than a million

to one shot. The soldier shoots the arrow, it goes up, comes down & hits Ahab in the chink of his armor. Ahab begins to bleed profusely until blood covers the floor of his chariot. But he wouldn't leave the battlefield. When he died that evening, the army begins to scatter. They bury Ahab in Samaria.

Now they had a chariot covered with his blood. They took it to the Ajax Chariot Wash & washed out the chariot. We're told it was where the prostitutes went to do their bathing. When they washed out the blood, there was so much of it that the dogs came & licked it up, just as Elijah had foretold.

What makes this story terrible to me isn't what it exposes about Ahab & Jezebel, but what it exposes about God—a sovereign God who is radically different from me, whose mind I can't read, whose decisions I can't predict, whose actions I can't control.

Yet it is what some of these stories in the Bible do. They pry our fingers away from our own ideas about who God should be & how God should act so that there are only two things left for us to do: use it to propel us toward the God who is or let it sink us like a stone.

In some way, I believe, we recognize in these terrible stories, the judgment, violence, rejection, death—that are all present in our world, if not

in our lives & there is some crazy kind of consolation in the fact that they are present in the Bible as well. They remind us that the Bible is not all lambs & rainbows. If it were, it wouldn't be our Book.

If we are open to this possibility in our interpretation of Scripture, then we open the possibility of its being true in the interpretation of our lives as well. Whether the terror is heard on Sunday or lived on Monday, the question remains the same: do we trust God to act in all the events of our lives, or only in the ones that meet with our approval?

Our hope, through all our own terror, is that we are being saved. Whatever we believe about why things happen the way they do, we are united by our hope that God is present in them, working redemption in light & in darkness, in weal & woe.

To hope this does not mean we lie down before the terror. For as long as we have strength to fight, it is both our nature & our privilege to do so. Sometimes God's blessing does not come until day-break, after a full night of wrestling angels & sometimes it takes much longer than that. As believers, it is our job to struggle with the terrors, refusing to let go of them until they have yielded their blessings.