

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

June 13, 2010
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 21:1-21a

When a Piece of Land is More Than a Piece of Land

If you were here last Sunday, you will recall that we were introduced to the prophet Elijah as he comes into the Biblical narrative in the book of 1 Kings. Elijah is arguably one of the most colorful characters in the Old Testament if not in the entire Bible. He's described as a hairy man—a wild and wooly sort of fellow. Elijah was on the scene as God's prophet some 800 years before Jesus. As he comes into the story, Ahab is the King of Israel. He was an opportunistic king in that he chose as his wife a princess of Phoenicia named Jezebel. By making her the queen, he was uniting two lands—Israel and Phoenicia—that would result in mutual benefit for them both. What Ahab found though in bringing these two lands together is that each of their cultures and religions were quite different from one another. This was particularly true from a religious perspective. Ahab was of Hebrew background and therefore was a part of the Jewish monotheistic faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. In contrast Queen Jezebel was a worshiper of Ba'al and was dedicated to the religion of her homeland. So after her marriage to King Ahab, she was determined to not only bring her faith to her new home in the royal palace but to go about the converting of Israel to the worship of Ba'al. It was into this milieu that God sent the prophet Elijah. So the contest between the religion of Israel and the Phoenician religion was not so much between King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, but rather between Elijah and the queen. And so in the early events of Elijah's work we find him and Jezebel in a war of sorts to win the hearts and minds of the people. Because she was the queen, she had at her disposal tremendous political, civil and military power in this struggle. Elijah had none of this—just his calling from God and the power that came from his faith. So in their skirmishes where Elijah time and time again displays God's supremacy, Queen Jezebel has nevertheless kept Elijah on the run and eventually he is run into hiding. He is hiding in some remote caves north of the capital city in which the king and queen live when we come to the story of our attention today.

It's in the wintertime and in the relative calm of not having to contend with Elijah, who is in hiding, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel decide to become snow birds and move south out of Samaria during the cold winter months to the city of Jezreel in warmer climes. Now like many of the snow birds we know (some of you are with us today) when they got to their southern base and got settled, King Ahab looked around and wanted to find something to do. And because he was in the warm south, he wanted to do something outside where he could take advantage of the balmy and pleasant weather. In looking around his new neighborhood he saw that there were many gardens where the warmth served to provide the conditions ideal for growing grapes and other plants. One piece of land caught his eye in particular. And although there was a vineyard on this plot, he determined that it was the perfect place for what would be his new vegetable garden. And so he went to the owner of the vineyard, a man named Naboth, and told him that he would like to buy the land from him at a reasonable price. Naboth had the perfect piece of land and King Ahab had the funds of the royal treasury at his disposal, it would be a simple transaction with the result that what was Naboth's vineyard would become Ahab's garden. But even after the king offered Naboth the choice of its fair market value in cash or a land-swap in which Naboth could have an even better vineyard in exchange, Naboth remained

steadfast in his refusal to turn over the property to Ahab. He basically told the king that the land was not for sale and that because it was his ancestral inheritance, he wasn't even permitted by Jewish law to sell the land to anyone outside his family. There was nothing that Ahab could offer Naboth that would sweeten the deal for Naboth. Naboth remained true to the requirements of his religion—which by the way was also Ahab's religion—and the king was incensed. Naboth was appealing to a higher authority when Ahab saw himself in that higher authority role in relation to his subjects. So what does Ahab do? He goes back to the winter royal palace, went to his royal bedroom, slammed the royal bedroom door, and threw himself on his royal bed and pouted royally, refusing to eat. In essence he threw not a royal tantrum, but a royal pity party. When the evil queen encounters her sullen husband, she is incredulous that he has given in on such a little matter. She in effect reminds him that he is the king after all, and that he can do whatever he darn well pleases. But rather than waste her time motivating Ahab to exercise his power, she tells him to go have a snack and that she will give Naboth's vineyard to him. And that's just what she does. She invokes what we today might call eminent domain by hatching a plot to undermine Naboth's reputation by bringing false charges against him that leads to his being sentenced to death. And before his capital punishment can be questioned or appealed he is stoned to death on the spot. After reporting back to King Ahab that Naboth is dead, Queen Jezebel urges Ahab to go and take possession of the coveted vineyard, which is exactly what he does. But as soon as King Ahab gets to his newly obtained plot of land, God calls Elijah out of hiding and instructs him to go and find the king so that God's judgment can be invoked. So before Ahab can even begin to tear out the grape vines so that the soil can be turned over for that sought-after vegetable garden of which he had been dreaming, that pesky Elijah shows up and essentially says that this evil act which Ahab has done, will result in Ahab's downfall. So although it was the sinister Jezebel who actually concocted the plot to frame Naboth and lead to his death sentence, God's judgment is meted out on the king himself who after all is the ultimate human authority with responsibility for everything that happens under his watch. By the way, when we read further in the story of King Ahab, he does indeed go down in the history of Israel's kings as one of the worst.

This is quite a story, with a plot line ideally suited for a made for TV movie or maybe even for a grand opera. With the evil king and queen, the innocent Naboth, and the prophet Elijah in hiding, this is a story that has multiple layers of meaning and import for the lesson it has for us today. Dean Feldmeyer in his commentary on this story lays out a number of these ways the story has been understood over the ages (www.sermonsuite.com):

- In 1870, Massachusetts senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner used this text as the basis for a speech he delivered on the floor of the Senate that opposed President Grant's proposal to annex the Dominican Republic as a colony of the United States.
- The Great commoner, Williams Jennings Bryan, used it for one of the most famous speeches in American history, a speech against imperialism and colonialism delivered in Denver in the winter of 1898.
- Preachers have long used it as a parable about the sin of covetousness—desiring something that is the property of someone else—and the terrible things that come as a result of wanting and striving to take that which is off-limits.

- The name “Jezebel” has become a metaphor for a sinful woman, a woman of loose morals, and a temptress. Although it has become lost to us in recent years, in the early part of the twentieth century a “Naboth’s Vineyard” was a metaphor for something that was desirable and tempting but could not be had.

Feldmeyer goes on to say though, “Many of these interpretations—while well-meant and somewhat accurate—miss the main point of the story, however. Naboth’s Vineyard is, in the final analysis, a story about the arrogance of wealth and power.” (*ibid.*)

It has to do with that piece of land. To King Ahab it was just a piece of land. As his wife reminded him, he’s the king so it’s all his anyway. So what’s the big deal that this little person Naboth won’t let you have it. It’s just a piece of land, Ahab. Take it!

But to Naboth this piece of land was more than a piece of land. It was a sacred trust that had been given over to him for his care and keeping by those in his family who had gone before him. While Naboth was able to make a living for himself and his family in the vineyard on this piece of land, it was part of a much larger framework of understanding our human role in tending that which God has provided us.

In our country one of the centerpieces of the so-called American dream is home ownership. And the vast majority of home owners hold title to a piece of land, a piece of property upon which their home is built and placed. Through much of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century that dream of home ownership was ever-expanding to include more and more Americans. That is until what is being described as the housing bubble burst. No longer are the statistics of increasing ownership being tracked. Now the number of home mortgages in foreclosure is the tally that is being watched. There have been a multitude of analysts who are studying just what happened to get us in this foreclosure mess. Many, if not all, of these analyses point to the arrogance of wealth and power on the part of some of the largest banks and mortgage brokers and their regulators that precipitated this debacle.

As the horrendous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico continues to flow for nearly two months now, those who are analyzing the causes of what is already being called the largest peacetime oil leak disaster in the history of the world, are uncovering the arrogance of wealth and power on both sides of the process that was supposed to ensure that sufficient safeguards against such environmental catastrophes are in place. Those two sides being the industry seeking the approval to use a piece of land for the production of oil as well as those governmental agencies that are entrusted with the public’s interest in the same piece of land. The piece of land here is of course a mile beneath the surface of the ocean and then down even deeper into the earth’s inner spaces—in actuality a very big piece of land. But the arrogance of wealth and power is not limited to the oil industry and the governmental regulating agencies. For let’s not forget that we in America with our nearly insatiable demand for an obscenely disproportionate share of the world’s energy resources is what drives us to ever more elusive places and pieces of land from which to satisfy our demand.

This story of Naboth’s vineyard and God’s confrontation with King Ahab, by way of Elijah, is a wake up call to us and to all people of the world who wield wealth and power. As we are reminded in the opening words of the Bible, the earth is a creation of God’s and we have been placed in it as stewards and as caretakers. For as we read in Psalm 24, “The

Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." When we remember that a piece of land is more than just a piece of land, in other words that it is part of the overall wonderful world which God has provided, our decisions about how it's used are tempered to think beyond our immediate and short term uses and dare I say abuses. For just as Naboth understood that the vineyard was not his but his family's, we as stewards of the world understand it as that which we tend, until those behind us step forward, as we step aside in that caring and tending and honoring.