

“Choose Justice”

Galatians 2: 15-21, I Kings 21: 1-10, 15-21a
Third Sunday after Pentecost/C, June 13, 2010
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If you didn't know the story of Ahab, Jezebel and Naboth was from the Bible, you might think you were hearing the plot line from an episode of “Desperate Housewives.” Whenever young people say the Bible is boring, I turn to stories like this to demonstrate there is nothing boring about the Bible. The elements of good “reality TV” are all present; greed, abuse of power, elitism, deceit, mob killing, cover ups. The list could go on and on. Nothing about this story is hard to believe, sad perhaps, but not hard to believe.

The story begins with King Ahab wanting what he can't have. In the first sentences of this story the writer shares details that help us make sense of what is about to unfold. The story begins, “Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.” This one sentence reveals so much. We know that Naboth calls this place home, he is from Jezreel, and this is his ancestral land. King Ahab on the other hand, is from Samaria. This palace is his “summer place.” He is only here for a season, from the colder Samaria hill country to the south. His strongest connection to Jezreel is his palace. He has no ancestral connection to this land. The king sees it as something to possess. Therefore, he approaches Naboth with what he thinks is a simple business proposal, one no rational person would refuse. The king grossly underestimates both Naboth and the situation.

The king's request is laced with insults. First, he wants to take away Naboth's ancestral vineyard and use it for a vegetable garden. He wants the land because it is convenient. The king promises to find Naboth a better vineyard or pay him what the land is worth. Neither of these options is suitable to Naboth. He does not refuse the king because he is stubborn. He refuses because the land does not belong to Naboth. This land has been entrusted to his family by God. He is only the steward of it and has no authority to sell it, under any circumstances or any price. He invites Naboth to name his price for the land (after all, for the King everything has a price.) King Ahab doesn't understand the concept of *covenant*.

Naboth answers from a place of integrity and faith. There is no price, no person nor any situation under which Naboth would part with this land. King Ahab is not Naboth's only suitor. The king has a partner and she is even more ruthless than he. When the king does not get what he desires, he slinks home and hides himself away. He lies on his bed, turns his face and refuses to eat. He acts more like a 6 year old than king. He is not used to being refused. He is used to getting whatever he wants.

Jezebel approaches her husband and slyly asks, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?” Every word is calculated. She has a plan and is not afraid to carry it out. No husband of hers is going to sit around and allow a lowly person like Naboth to treat him that way. She tells the king to “get up, eat some food and be cheerful.” She will take care

of everything. She doesn't say, "You can have this vineyard," or even "I will help you get this vineyard." She tells him, "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

The writer and preacher Herbert O'Driscoll says, "Suddenly everything changes. Inaction becomes throbbing action. A conspiracy is formed. Letters of invitation to betray Naboth go out to people whom he had thought of as his friends and neighbors. We can assume that none of them resists the political pressure from the palace. In a matter of days Naboth is betrayed. Isolated and condemned, he is taken by the mob and beaten to death." Mission accomplished, Ahab has his vineyard.

Once Ahab realizes that Naboth is dead, he takes possession of the vineyard. There he is confronted by Elijah. The jig is up for King Ahab. Elijah names Ahab's appalling behavior with "searing clarity." Ahab is exposed, not only by Elijah, but by the God that Elijah names as his judge. Ahab and Jezebel may not be immediately punished, but they will not get away with this murderous behavior. After all, they have not stolen Naboth's land, but God's. God will not take lightly the murder of his faithful servant in order to take possession of a few acres of land.

If you take five minutes to digest this story you can likely think of any number of parallels from today's headlines. I only wish this were the plot line to some fictional drama, but it is not. I am sure it is easy to see the similarities in what is unfolding with the BP oil disaster. There is another story I heard Thursday on NPR's program "Fresh Air" however, that is eerily similar to this ancient story.

Terry Gross interviewed Josh Fox producer and creator of the documentary "Gasland." Josh Fox lives in the Upper Delaware River Basin, on the border straddling Pennsylvania and New York State. In May 2008, he received a letter from a natural gas mining company. The company wanted to lease 19.5 acres of land from Fox — and would pay him \$100,000 to do so.

"[They say] 'We might not even drill,' "he tells *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross. " 'We don't even know if there's gas here. It's going to be a fire hydrant in the middle of a field — very little impact to your land. You won't hardly know we're here.' "

Instead of saying yes, Fox decided to travel around the country to see how the process of natural gas drilling affected other communities and homeowners. The result, his documentary *Gasland*, premieres on HBO on June 21.

Fox explains the process of unconventional gas drilling — the technique used by mining companies to obtain natural gas — as well as why he believes there is continued cause for concern.

For example, some homeowners he spoke to noticed that their water had been discolored or was starting to bubble. And in some communities, people were able to light the water coming out of their faucets on fire — because chemicals from the natural gas drilling process had seeped into the water. (Summary from an interview with Josh Fox from the NPR website)

I learned a lot in the ten minute segment I heard. To be fair, not all gas companies act this way, however, on behalf of those who have been victimized by this behavior, we can not make excuses or deny what has happened. To do so would victimize these people a second time. We can not keep silent in the face of injustice or we risk being held accountable for what happens. That is the warning we receiving this morning from the prophet Elijah. As people of faith we hold ourselves to a higher standard of scrutiny.

Fox spoke of the tactics the gas companies use to gain access to this land. It sounds a lot like the tactics King Ahab used with Naboth. First they approach a land owner gently, with a reasonable proposal that seemingly no one would refuse. If the landowner does refuse, they remind them they will receive a sizable payment for very little effort or disruption. If they refuse a third time, the gas company then insists that they have the power to drill on their land any way and if the landowner is smart they will at least take payment. If the people that surround a person's property agree to drilling, then the company automatically has access to their land, whether or not they refuse.

Fox tells the story of one landowner that began collecting the carcasses of dead animals. When the creek began to bubble and the animals turned up dead she decided to take action. She started freezing rabbits, toads and other small creatures until someone would agree to autopsy them and document what was killing them. When the companies drill for natural gas they release more than gas. There are many toxic chemicals that leach into the ground water infecting creeks and wells and the natural aquifer. Homeowners become trapped on their land because once this happens; no one is interested in purchasing this property.

The executives who behave this way are not beyond judgment. Elijah warned Ahab that if he thought he had gotten away with Naboth's murder, he was wrong. He was complicit in this murder as clearly as if he had thrown the first stone. God would hand down the final judgment. You can run, but you can not hide from God. This kind of arrogant, self serving, manipulative, narcissistic behavior is perpetrated every day with the same dire consequences. We think no one is paying attention to the decisions we make until a well blows up killing workers, infecting an entire ecosystem and robbing thousands of people of their livelihood. We think it is acceptable to lie and manipulate people into giving up what they hold dear until people get sick or can no longer use the land they cherished because it is now a toxic wasteland.

Friends, nothing will change unless we repent and admit that our behavior perpetuates these unethical decisions. My son Bruce reminded me that if we do not learn from history, then history will repeat itself. Amen! Our greed, our dependence on fuel, our insistence on driving big cars, owning big homes and flying on big planes has contributed to this situation. God is screaming “simplify!” and we are not paying attention. God is weeping at the condition of the creation while we argue about where to lay blame for the disasters we create. Instead, we ought to be praying about how to make meaningful changes in our lives to avoid such disasters in the first place. I do it. We all do. What will it take for us to listen?

In talking about the gulf oil disaster Jim Wallis said recently, “When I appeared on cable news shows last week to discuss the oil spill, Chris Matthews responded to the things I was saying about our oil addiction by replying, ‘Well, you’re going farther and deeper than we normally get on this show.’ Right, and that’s the problem,” says Wallis. “It is indeed time to go deeper. And if we don’t turn this ‘teachable moment’ into decisions to fundamentally change the ways that we energize our economy, we may never make these necessary changes in our lifetimes.” He goes on to ask, “So how do we go deeper? Maybe by listening more deeply and not just watching....First we listen, then we decide what we will sacrifice in service, action, and even lifestyle. And only then will we change.”

I fear we are leaving our children a legacy of shame. We have the power to change our behavior, to model something different, to break the mold. We have the power to speak and embody a counter cultural message, one based on the principles of Jesus Christ and a loving, just God. This is about power. We have it, we misuse it, and we can change. I know there are no simple answers, but as faithful people we can not hear this warning from God to Ahab and not see ourselves in it. We are not beyond God’s judgment. We may not have built the oil rig or taken people’s land to drill for natural gas, but we have participated in the systems that need to be fed by this out of control behavior. We can change. We need to change. It is what our God expects of us. We can call upon God for the courage, strength and power to stand against these destructive forces for the sake of creation, our children and ourselves. We can not wait any longer. God will be with us. May it be so!

Amen

Sources:

Herbert O’Driscoll, “Reflections on the lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, June 1, 2010, p. 21.

Interview with Josh Fox on “Fresh Air”, by Terry Gross, June 10, 2010