

## **The God Who Sees and Sets Things Right**

June 16, 2019

Scripture: 1 Kings 21: 1-10 and 15-21a (11-14)

*<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 and 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, and would not eat.*

*<sup>5</sup> His wife Jezebel came to him and 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 and 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? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."*

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

*<sup>15</sup> As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and 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> 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, and 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".*



Today we begin a new sermon series. This series is called "Intervention" and looks at how God sees, and cares, and, at times, intervenes in human affairs. Over the course of the series we will look at how God acts to make things right, at how God acts to empower us in difficult situations, at how God acts at times to enlighten and direct His own people, and at how God acts in simple ways to intervene for our benefit. Today we look at a story of deceit and murder and at how God saw the injustice and worked to make things right. Let us pray...

Our passage for this morning comes from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 21. It contains the story of power abused in the worst of ways. The story begins innocently enough. King Ahab sees a piece of property that he would like to have. It is, after all, right next to the palace. Ahab goes to Naboth and says, *"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"*. Ahab is being both courteous and generous. But Naboth will not sell. He states that selling it would displease God. Indeed, in the Jewish culture land was supposed to remain in the family. It would have displeased God for Naboth to sell his inheritance for financial gain. Naboth would have seen his land as a sacred inheritance from God. In the book of Joshua, each family was allocated land following the occupation of the promised land. His family would have received this land as a divine gift and as a trust. To sell it would be to cut off his own descendants. Land was not only financial security but also a connection to one's family. It was so important that land remain in the same family that God established the Jubilee. Every fifty years, the land that had somehow passed from a family's possession was restored to them. So, of course, he cannot sell the land.

King Ahab does not take the news well. In verse 4 we read that he went home and *"lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat"*. He went home mortified and humiliated and he pouted. The king's request was refused - he did not get what he wanted. Ahab was from Israel. He would have understood the reasons that Naboth refused to sell. It is here that Jezebel, Ahab's wife, enters the story. She finds her husband sulking on his bed and asks

him what is wrong. Ahab explains the story to her and she responds with these words: "*Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth*". Jezebel is claiming Ahab's kingly authority and he is allowing her to do so. She is telling her husband, 'You are the king, you can have whatever you want. I will get it for you'. And Jezebel knows how to work the halls of power. She did not openly take the vineyard, nor did she simply have Naboth killed outright.

What Jezebel did was to plan and scheme and lay a trap for Naboth. Using her husband's name and seal as royal authority, she wrote letters to the elders of Naboth's community. The letters instructed them to proclaim a fast and to have Naboth at the head of the assembly. A fast would be declared to announce that some evil or calamity had come upon Israel. Usually a scapegoat was found for the evil. Jezebel planned for the goat to be Naboth. Once the fast began "*two scoundrels*" accused Naboth of cursing God and the king – crimes punishable by stoning. And that is exactly what happened to Naboth. Hearing that her scheme was a success, Jezebel goes to Ahab and says, "*Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth... for Naboth is not alive, but dead*". Ahab went out and took possession of the vineyard, for there was nothing to stop him.

Nothing to stop Ahab except the word of the Lord – this Lord of power and might who sits on high but who looks down low. God sends for His prophet Elijah, telling him to go to King Ahab of Israel. Elijah is sent with a message to deliver. As he approaches Naboth's vineyard, I can envision King Ahab walking

contentedly in the vineyard, quite pleased with himself at this point. He has gotten what he wanted at no cost to himself. The land would not have to go to Naboth's heirs because, legally it would be within the rights of the king to seize the land of an executed criminal. Legally – within the letter of the law. But not God's law. Enter Elijah the prophet, the voice of God.

Throughout his ministry as a prophet of God, Elijah has always forcefully opposed the royal practices that were unjust and has spoken out against the arrogant use of power to take advantage of the weak and marginalized in society. The plot of Ahab and Jezebel against Naboth fits squarely in these parameters. God speaks to Elijah and tells him to go to Ahab and to say, *"Have you killed, and also taken possession?... In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood"*. The sin of Ahab and Jezebel, the crime they plotted and executed, was not just an offense against poor, but also an offense against God. Therefore, the God who sees and cares will intervene on behalf of the slain Naboth. In the end, the truth wins.

Though innocents may die, God speaks through the prophet's voice, taking up and bringing justice on behalf of the victim. God intervenes to act with justice and might on behalf of oppressed. Elijah says to Ahab, *"Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you"*. In time, all of this will come true. Ahab will die in battle and the dogs will lick up his blood. Jezebel will suffer a violent death, being thrown from a window. The dogs of the streets will eat her flesh and drink her blood.

Disaster does come; both Ahab and Jezebel are consumed. In the end, God's righteous justice has the last word.

In our day and age, Elijah's damaging accusation, "*You have sold yourself*" continues to resonate with us. When we were younger, and perhaps even now as adults, we desire popularity and status so much that we can be willing to "sell" ourselves or to hide our true personalities, our faith, and even our friendships to win the approval of the "in" crowd. In certain seasons of life, we can blindly pursue money or some other measure of personal success or glory in a sport or activity - no matter the cost to us or to our values or to our faith. The story of Ahab and Jezebel may shock us, but at times we too have been guilty of selling ourselves. And at other times, if we are really being honest, our pursuits of the things of this world have had negative impacts on others too – on innocents like Naboth. Our families or friends or coworkers or teammates or others who have looked up to us as Christians, as role models, have been disappointed at the least, poorly influenced and maybe even led astray at the worst. When we choose to go down these wrong paths, God does not give up on us, but instead works to redeem and restore us. God's love for us is always greater than our sin.

This is why God's righteousness continues to reign. In the scriptures, God has promised never to leave or to forsake us. Because of His great love for all of His children, God continues to act on behalf of all of us and especially on behalf of the weaker members of society. In His own unique ways, God continues to

intervene on behalf of the downtrodden and the abused. God continues to send one with a prophetic voice to speak for the weak and the powerless. God is still indeed the God who sees and cares and sets things right. Human beings will always continue to try and thwart the purposes of God, but in the end, God will always prevail. In the end, we know the story – God wins. Love always wins.

Elijah came and spoke for Naboth. This was the pattern for many prophets in the Old Testament. The pattern continued in the New Testament with John the Baptist calling out in the wilderness and then the voice was picked up by perhaps the greatest champion of the outcast, the marginalized, the abused – Jesus Christ. As people who fall in the great line of faithful witnesses, as people who were commissioned to go out to share the good news and hope of Jesus Christ with a world in need, we too can be a voice for the outcast, the marginalized, the abused. As was the case with many of the heroes of the faith, sometimes there is a cost. As we draw near to a close, I want to share a short story that reveals what can be asked of our faith and how that can affect people in our world. It is an old story, but the basic truth of it can still be applied today.

During the time of the persecution of Christians in Rome there was an incident that forever changed the heart of one senator. He had gathered together all of his servants who were known to be Christians and had them arrested and sent to the Coliseum to be killed. Seated in the Senator's place of honor he looked with horror to see his wife leave the stands, step down into the arena, hold hands with her servant girl and face the lions together. They were equal in Christ.

In our time and place, God continues to use the voices of believers to stand for justice and equity in the world. The world may not see the “other” – the servant girl in our Coliseum story, the isolated neighbor down the street, the single mom struggling to make it - as an equal, but in Christ we are all the same. At times we too may be called upon to hold hands with someone and to give much on their behalf. In doing so we will speak volumes about the love of God. It is my hope and prayer that sometimes that voice that speaks up for the powerless or the abused or the marginalized is one of our voices. As the Spirit leads, we may very well be called to be strength for the weak or power for the afflicted or compassion for those who are grieved. As people of faith, we must be willing to be a prophetic voice against the evils of this world. We must also be willing to be a voice of love, proclaiming God’s reign in our time and place. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Grow. When has the God who “sits on high but looks down low” seen you in a time of need? How did this help your faith grow?
- 2) Pray. Elijah spoke against injustice. Where might God be leading you to speak for one dealing with injustice...? Pray for guidance.
- 3) Serve. To whom could you be like the Senator’s wife – the one who stepped down to “hold hands” with one who was facing a trial?