

Naboth and His Vineyard...

I Kings 21

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I want to tell you a story from I Kings 21, about a man named Naboth and his Vineyard. In addition to Naboth, there are three other characters: One, Ahab the King; two, a Queen named Jezebel; and third, Elijah, the Prophet. If you manage to insert yourself into the scene, which is my hope, that would make five in total.

The time is 875 to 850 BC, BCE if you prefer. The place is the city of Jezreel, an ancient and important town at the head of the Valley of that name, up in the Northern portion of the divided Kingdom. Jezreel had a spectacular view of the Sea of Galilee to the North. The Jordan River Valley was off to the East. And, to the West on a clear day, you could see past Mt. Carmel on out to the Mediterranean Sea.

The capital city of the North was Samaria, but Omri, Ahab's father, had built a summer Royal residence up in the mountains at Jezreel. In addition to the cool

breezes, it was secluded and protected, a perfect place to relax. The lush valley and the fresh springs provided an ideal grazing land for his 2000 horses. The fortified walls, with their twin towers, provided a safe a haven for his family and friends, and in the surrounding acreage there was room to store his 2500 chariots and other weapons of war. Ahab was a noted warrior-King, but he adored the peaceful, quiet beauty of Jezreel, away from the heat of the city. If you have or know of such a place, you will know how he felt.

Naboth lived next door to the Palace. I think you would have liked him. He was hardworking, faithful, a traditionalist and courageous—our kind of guy. He lived in his little cottage with his wife and children, minding his own wine business which had been in his family for generations.

But, one day, (Are you listening?) the plot thickens: remember how King David, two centuries before, peered down from his Palace and spied Bathsheba, his neighbor Uriah's young wife, Ahab looked down and coveted not his neighbor's wife, not that we know of, he had his eyes on Naboth's little Vineyard. It says he wanted it so he could plant a vegetable garden there, which some commentators say really meant that he planned a fancy herb garden so he could prepare elaborate concoctions for the alien Baal-worship of his wife.

And, just as boldly as David went next door and came back with Bathsheba, Ahab strolled over and made an offer on the property which he thought Naboth couldn't refuse. The King said he would pay Naboth a reasonable price; or if Naboth preferred, he would trade him for another piece of royal property somewhere else. Fair enough... It was just that Naboth's Vineyard was adjacent to the Palace and after all, you don't want your King hiking all over the place to tend his garden.

But, if you know the story, Naboth refused, saying: I quote: "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance I have received from my fathers!" (I Kgs 21:3) His heritage was not for sale. The traditions of his family meant more to him than the favor of the King and all the silver and gold in the world. That Vineyard would one

day be cherished by his children and grandchildren after he was gone, and that was that. As they say on TV, "No deal!"

Now, if you do not remember the story, what do you think happened next? I mean money talks, right? Power corrupts. Kings rule. What chance did little Naboth have against the mighty Ahab, who it seems would have held an automatic power of eminent domain over all the property of his Kingdom. Yet, the Bible says that Ahab simply went back home and became so depressed, perhaps normal behavior for him, that he crept into his bed, turned his face to the wall, it says, and he refused to eat. What a dainty dish to set before the King. Ahab had been victorious in a host of heroic battles, but he was a wimp when he came up against an honest man who cared about his tradition. Would you care to guess why?

Well, remember Ahab was an Israelite before he was a King. He knew that unlike the various religions around them, the Bible taught the dignity of the men and women who were made in the Image of God. We forget how novel that idea was. Ahab knew Naboth had a sacred right and responsibility to keep his ancestral property. It clearly says it in Leviticus (25:23) and in Deuteronomy (25:5.) Ezekiel 46:18 declares bluntly that, "The Prince shall not take away the inheritance of the people...and no one shall be dispossessed of his rights." So there was nothing Ahab could do, not without forsaking his traditions and turning his back on the Torah. So, like most husbands who do not get what they want, he went home to nurse his hurt pride and wallowed in self pity. End of story? Well, not quite.

Ahab was married to a beautiful but conniving young Queen, Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, the King of the Sidonians, and part of the powerful Phoenician Kingdom out near the Sea. The marriage had probably been arranged to solidify two great powers in central Palestine. That was done with Monarchs, as you know. No one knows if they loved each other or not, but it is clear that Jezebel adored the idea of being Queen, and it is clear that she also ruled the roost. Ahab was putty in her hands. Don't anybody laugh. It seems that whatever the Bible says about the dominance of the husband, this wife was really in charge. (Don't anybody laugh...)

As an aside, I think of that old story of the two entrance lines outside the Pearly Gates. The sign above the first line read: "Henpecked Husbands stand here." The other read: "Non-henpecked husbands stand here." The first line had hundreds of men standing in line. In the second line, there was just one little guy. St. Peter sent someone over to him and asked, "Are you sure you are in the right place, this line is for the men who were in charge of their homes." He meekly replied, "No, I am not sure, but my wife told me to stand here!"

Anyway, as the King was whimpering in his bedroom, with his face to the wall, and in stomped Jezebel. "What are you doing here Ahab, pouting and refusing to eat your lunch? What happened this time?" He told her the story. She snarled, "What's wrong with you, are you the King of Israel or not? Come on now, get up and eat your meal and be cheerful (for once.) I will take care of Naboth and get you your little Vineyard!"

Then Jezebel, not beholden to the Jewish Law, pilfered some of the King's stationery and the Royal Seal, and she forged letters to the Noblemen and City fathers, falsely accusing Naboth of cursing God and the King, demanding that he be thoroughly punished. She hired two "scoundrels," the Bible calls them, to testify in the mock trial as false witnesses against Naboth. And you can guess what happened next: the Noblemen and City Councilmen, beholden to Ahab for their bounty, predictably sided with Jezebel. Blasphemy was a capital offense. Naboth was dragged outside the city gates, and along with his two sons, we learn later over in II Kings 9, he was stoned to death? Ugly story, how sad, all because he wouldn't give up his Vineyard. Do you think he did the right thing? We used to say up home: "Better a live coward than a dead hero."

Anyway, when the scoundrels told Jezebel that Naboth was gone, it says that she marched back into the Palace and told Ahab not what really had happened, but simply that Naboth was gone and the Vineyard now belonged to the King. I

suppose Ahab was happy but it does not say for sure. But, one thing for sure is that the Lord God was not happy.

Well, Ahab strolled over to survey his new Vineyard, trying to decide how to lay out his vegetable garden, when in walked the fourth person in the story, Elijah the Prophet. Elijah, you recall, had been in a constant battle with Ahab and Jezebel for years. The Queen had enticed Ahab to experiment with her Baal worship. She even persuaded him to build a Temple for her up in Samaria, which featured a huge pole in the center in honor of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility (I Kgs 16:37). Oh, the things that went on in that temple.

At its zenith, Elijah had his spectacular confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal, as they vied with each other to see whose God would answer and bring fire down on the altar. The prophets of Baal went first. They danced around the altar, calling on their god to send down fire. Nothing happened. Elijah mocked them saying, "How long will you go on limping around, your god has no power, watch." He doused the altar with water, prayed to Yahweh, and down came the fire which ignited not only the sacrificial offering but also smoked away all 450 prophets of Baal, who had just come down from a festive dinner party at the Palace, thrown Queen Jezebel. To say the least, she was not very happy. She cursed Elijah, who got scared and ran away, all the way out to Mt. Horeb (Sinai), where God whispered in his ear, not in the wind or the storm, but with a still small voice.

The Lord told him several things to do, but the one which belongs to our story is that God instructed him was to go down and find Ahab and tell him what Yahweh thought of what had been done to Naboth. The Lord God knew that Jezebel had engineered the dirty deed, but just like the Garden of Eden, when Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, God blamed all of them. Ahab was not to hide behind his conniving wife, devious as she was. "Ahab, thou art the man!"

When Elijah entered the Vineyard, Ahab, a little nervous and feeling guilty, spoke first. "Have you found me, O my enemy?" he asked. Elijah said, "Sure I found you, the Lord told me where you were. I came to tell you that you have sold yourself out. You have done evil in the sight of the Lord. So, God will sweep you away because you stole the heritage of an innocent man."

Ahab was stunned. For a while he thought his misdeed had gone unnoticed, even if deep inside he knew better. So when Elijah condemned him, it says he repented and humbled himself. That pleased God, a little; it is good to be sorry when you have done something wrong and apologize, but it was too late. What's done is done. "God is not mocked," St. Paul is speaking, "for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. Your sin will find you out." (Galatians 6:7ff)

And, sure enough, within one generation, God moved a Prince named Jehu into the Royal Palace. Ahab with all his kith and kin, his familiar friends and priests, and Jezebel too, were gone. (II Kings 10:11) The Temple in Samaria, with its seductive statue of Asherah within it, was crushed to the ground. The summer palace and Military Fortress at Jezreel were pummeled into dust. And we are finally to the end of the story. I hope you are not too depressed.

But you might be asking where the message is; what is the sermon which comes out of the story? I have a brief one: in three parts:

1. First, the Bible makes it clear that there is a relationship in this mortal life between what is done and what can result. Sin does have a way of finding us out. It matters what you do. The story of Ahab and Naboth make that entirely clear. It was wrong to swindle Naboth out of his heritage. Our Heavenly Father keeps a watch over all that goes on, and he is never fooled. Adam and Eve found out in the Garden of Eden that you cannot hide from the Lord. It has to do with fairness: those who commit crimes should be convicted. True. Nothing makes us so angry as to hear of a convicted criminal being released on technical grounds. People should pay for their misdeeds.

2. But Second, and more important, as Christian people we need to correct the impression that the Bible and this story teaches that God is unforgiving, or that He holds an eternal grudge against us for our sins. The early Old Testament often seems to be built around that idea, but you and I who believe in the forgiving love of Jesus Christ can never let the story end with vengeance. Some ghastly things happened to the family and friends of Ahab in the Chapters to come; that is for sure.

But, to refocus the point: In Christ we are forgiven. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God knows you are not perfect. Jesus Christ was perfect so we don't have to be. I would not want you to leave this morning, thinking of anyone you know, or far less, worrying about yourself, wondering whether God will refuse to forgive you for some sin – real or imagined - that you let creep into your life. The Lord God forgives and forgets, as some human beings do not. There is a huge difference between feeling guilty and being guilty. You might feel remorse for something you did and wish it never had happened, but ultimately if you surrender it to the Glory of God in the presence of his Son; we say it every Sunday morning in Church: "Friends believe the good news of the Gospel, in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

3. Then Third and most important, we need to move on to a living message from Naboth and his Vineyard. It begins with the idea that our spiritual and moral inheritance is precious. Your family traditions belong to you and yours forever. The heritage of our Nation is precious and irreplaceable. There is no doubt that the secular leanings of the day are stealing it away from us, piece by piece. Our way of life is in danger and witnessed against by the "scoundrels" who do not know or care about the foundations on which our freedom rests. We have some work to do.

In my retirement from active Parish work, I have been reading biographies of our Presidents from Washington on. I now up to James Polk. I am amazed again at how much they suffered and how much they gave. Harlow Giles Unger's recent biography titled "The Unexpected George Washington," shows how he and the Founding Fathers risked everything in the name of Freedom.

That in turn, led me to go and find Cokie Roberts' book on "The Founding Mothers." What a lovely read, told with good humor and zest in behalf of those early women of the land. While the Founding Fathers were off fighting and negotiating the freedom, their wives were tending to the chores, escaping the marauding enemies from town to town, hurrying up to the battlefield to bring support and succor to their husbands and friends, all the while tending the farm and family business, even trying to collect unpaid bills from clients, and saddest all, bearing and burying their children all alone.

Roberts writes, "As Abigail Adams worked hard, making due with little and missing her husband (who was off for years negotiating with France) all for the good of the country, she wondered whether future generations would know or care. 'Posterity, who will reap the blessings of what we do,' Abigail wrote to John, will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors.'" End quote.

Hardly a day goes by but that we observe a diminution of what once was. And the process is so subtle. Almost no one openly declares war: just a little change of venue here, a slightly different spin on the law there, a little patter about what other deserve and how we have to keep an open mind, a compromise on issues that were inviolable in the past. Remember Confucius is said to have said: "Keep an open mind, but don't let your brains fall out!" And they have.

My cousin, The Very Rev. Howard Cromie, is past Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We keep in touch often by telephone. One day shortly after the continuing financial crisis had struck in Ireland as well as our own country, as I was speaking to him, he said, "Aye it's bad over here too. No one knows what to do.' His daughter Gillian added, "The problem Richard, is that we forgot about our roots; we turned our backs on how we got to be so favored; we threw away the heritage out of which we grew strong and prosperous. We took all kinds of shortcuts and yearn for more, no matter what we had. We are getting our just rights!"

I was reading the current issue of the Smithsonian, the 40th Anniversary edition. Mostly the well known commentators from every walk of life, including the President declare righteously that we will manage meet the tests of the century ahead and that because we are Americans, automatically brighter days are ahead. We can hope so. But then Carl Hiaasen, the Miami newsman and novelist, not known for being conservative, hit that confidence right between the eyes. He said he thought we were slipping down the hill, devolving backwards rather than evolving forward. He wrote that our complacency has allowed all manners of alien forces to control our way of life. We have lost the pattern of honesty and our commitment to the common good.

Naboth meanwhile, reminds us that there is a time to stand up and say "No Thanks!" To say, "No Deal!" to those who creep into our various Vineyards and offer money or an exchange or some new promise or some catchy yarn about how the world is moving on and we need to get with it. Jeremiah said you have "to stand by the ancient path" and guard the way there, or you will be blown around by whatever wind is whistling by.

We need to restore a sense of honor and a pattern of honesty. We are a long way from where we should be. If you compromise yourself, you have nothing left worth keeping. Naboth paid a price; that was sad. But he refused to sell his birthright. Esau sold his for a bowl of porridge; the younger brother squandered his on riotous living; Faust exchanged his for youth and worldly delights; Silas Mariner surrendered his for a pot of Gold; and dozens we all know or have heard of, sold their birthrights for a momentary diversion.

Naboth said "No deal." It is not going to happen on my watch, not if I can help it! It took courage to choose to honor his family heritage and the moral principles of the Land. You see, if you don't stand for something, you will fall for whatever new fad or fancy which comes along. I say it especially but not only for the younger

ones among us. Our inheritance is not a free gift, nor is it guaranteed to last forever, vigilance is still the price we have to pay to protect it.

In a little nutshell, the gist of my message is this: "Let's not sell the farm. Let's not trade it away for any substitute. Let's not comprise one little corner of an acre. Let's not be careless about it and let it drift away. Don't give up on what you believe. Don't deal trivially with triumphant themes! Or in one single generation, it could all be gone. It was not long before Ahab plowed under the grape vines which had been in Naboth's family for generations. He planted a foreign garden where there had been a rich heritage and tradition of the Lord.

Not one of us can accomplish all that we long to do in a single lifetime. As the Pennsylvania Dutch say, "Vee git too soon oldt and too late schmart." We have to depend on those who will follow us to defend and prosper what we have valued. But, we need to tell them what those values are. It is a matter of education.

So it is time to close. Some of you might be sitting there thinking, "Oh well, Reverend, I have heard most all of this before, but what am I supposed to do about it now. Should I write my congress-person or Senator? Sure. Should I pray to God about it? Definitely. Should I speak to those around me, at home, at school, at work, at play? Most certainly! Should I object each time I am offended? Sure! But there is something else we can do.

Father Teilhard de Chardin, the great Christian French paleontologist taught us to think of the universe as containing two huge cosmic buckets: one labeled "Good," the other "Evil." Each time we make a decision; each time we feel discouraged, each time we are ready to throw up our hands in disgust, we should pause and decide where we intend to invest that moment of our lives and sacred fortunes. Each and every decision we make and the action which follows has eternal consequences. Oh that we could learn that, believe it and never forget it.

We need to make sure that everything we do, even if it seems to be only a drop in the bucket, or two drops, or ten thousand. We need to make sure that each one and every one is deposited in the bucket labeled "Good". For goodness knows those who are filling the buckets with evil are fervently plotting for the future.

We can't change the whole wide world, but by our prayers and actions and example: a little righteous indignation here, a little stubborn refusal to compromise there, a new commitment to the good and holy things which Jesus Christ requires, and all the rest.

Then, one day, in God's good time, not our own, when the bucket will be finally filled to overflowing, the Lord will tip it over and finally, finally, "Justice will roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Count on it. Jesus Christ promised that he would not fail us nor forsake us. Let's offer him the same in return, for now and forevermore. Amen.