

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

People and Power

1 Kings 21

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A Season of Justice and Peace

This morning, we come face to face with one of the most compelling figures in all Sacred Scripture, Elijah the prophet, arising from a small village that is completely marginal. Elijah's name means "Yahweh is God," and scripture presents him as a man of crystal-clear faith at a time when the powers in power seemed to wake up in the morning, thinking to themselves, "How can I wreck people's lives today?"

Ahab was the king in power at the time. The scripture introduces him as "the worst... the most idolatrous in all Israel's history." He and his wife Jezebel, whose name means "Where is Ba'al?" bring to Israel's throne of power a character and spirit in opposition to the Lord and the Lord's ways. And it wrecked people's lives.

Ahab looked out his window on a small vineyard next to the king's palace. He wanted it for himself. He'd wanted it for a while. He wanted no longer to look out his window and see a vineyard.

Every vineyard was a living parable of the covenant the people of Israel had with God: to worship God and God alone, to care for the land and honor its life and gift, and to live in justice with neighbor, with particular attention to the most vulnerable: the poor, widows, orphans, sojourners in the land. This covenant bound them together with God in a way of life rooted in sabbath-keeping, fidelity, truth-telling, justice, and mercy. It is a way of life ordered by love of God and love of neighbor. The vineyard was a reminder of it all. Ahab wanted such a reminder out of his sight because he wanted the inconvenient covenant out of his way. He wanted to tear out the vineyard and install a vegetable garden. Now, I'm all for vegetable gardens, but the only other time in scripture, in Deuteronomy (11.10) the word for vegetable garden is used to describe life in Egypt. Symbolically, the king wants to tear out the vineyard of Israel and install the vegetable garden of Egypt. He wanted to tear out the heart of beloved community and replace it with the iron fist of empire. That's what is at stake in this story.

The story that follows is a scandalous inversion of the gospel good Samaritan story: Who is your neighbor? Ahab walks over next door, and the conversation went something like this: "Hey Naboth, old neighbor. Good looking grapes you have growing there. What are those? San Genovese?"

"What's San Genovese?"

"Are they Cabernet Sauvignon?"

"I don't know what that is."

"Are they Welch's Grape Juice that people will use in communion?"

“I don’t know what that is, either.”

“Ya, neither do I, those are from the future, I think. I’m a wine fraud. I don’t know what kind of grapes are grown in Jerusalem in the 9th century BC. Who has time to AI that?”

“What’s AI?”

“Nobody knows.”

“Anyway, neighbor, I’ve been thinking. I’ve got a deal for you. How about you trade me this vineyard, which we can both see is right next to my palace, which is awkward for both of us I’m sure. I’ll trade you this scrappy vineyard for a nice one just outside of town. Or, if you’d prefer, I’ll just give you the money, a fair price. Deal?”

Naboth rejected it, “The LORD forbid that I give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

Ahab did not see that coming. Naboth’s answer, a theological response, makes plain different visions of land and of God and their place in it all. In Ahab’s eyes, land is a commodity to be bought and sold at some value and so is everything. In Naboth’s eyes, in the eyes of the Lord, land is a gift, an identity that makes you who you are, and your place in the world with your neighbors. The ancient wisdom was that the places we inhabit and care for root us with our ancestors and our descendants and God’s purposes for all of us as beloved community, and some things are beyond price. “I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

Most of our lives are not so rooted in a particular piece of land, though there are places that are special and have generational meaning to us. What we do retain from ancient days is fidelity to our baptized identity as a community God and recognition that sometimes that puts us as dissenters to the steamroll of the culture, the logic of the economy, and the schemes of the state, just as Naboth dissented from Ahab’s proposition. Naboth wasn’t against the nation when he stood against the king of the nation; he was for the nation, for the purpose and highest ideals of the nation and therefore, couldn’t transact his little piece of that away, no matter how enticing the terms of the deal.

We’re a long way from him and in a very different context, yet we stand there beside Naboth anytime we reject overtures to sell out our convictions or turn aside from the gifts of the Lord. Naboth dissented. In our history, Baptists were dissenters, too.

At the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting this week in St. Louis, we were reminded in an utterly electric sermon how our Baptist forefathers and mothers dissented from the government’s push to swallow faith into the insatiable hunger of the state and use the name of God as a cover. Baptists said the state cannot dictate the conscious of the person of faith and cannot restrict it. The church must always be at distance from the state and sustain within its character the courage to dissent. But not to dissent merely for the sake of dissent, but to dissent for the purpose of the vulnerable. We bear witness for truth against lies, for justice against corruption and misuse of power, for gospel integrity against the church being coopted. Sometimes it means the church suffers and we are reminded that

when we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ's death. Our forefathers suffered--many of them did. Some were killed, some lost everything, but they didn't lose crystal-clear conviction that the way of Jesus is the way of God is the way of dissent when dissent is necessary. If we haven't totally yet sold out our heritage and our conviction and the solid rock on which we stand, the courage of Baptists and people like Baptist Christians can still shine with holy light.

Davis Ausburger, an anabaptist pastor calls it "dissident discipleship," reminding us that discipleship in the way of Jesus is so much more than the politics of the day. He says, "Dissident discipleship is not a political movement, but it takes politics seriously; it is not optimistic about the power of political change, but is concerned about calling for justice, equality, and sensitivity to human need, and is committed to seeking solutions that do not cost lives and that take into account the needs of all people. Politics... is not the Christian's first concern; nor is it the church's central mission. When we pray 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' we mean something much more radical, more revolutionary, more life and culture-changing than politics can ever be." (*Dissident Discipleship*, 208)

Where does the courage of such discipleship come from? For Naboth there was no long soul-searching or long speech. He simply replied to the king's face what he knew deep down in his bones to be true: I cannot give you what is not mine to give.

They didn't see it coming, and they had him killed for it--for his vineyard, for his courage, for his refusal to take part in the exploitive, God's-name-in-vain schemes to hollow out the covenantal vision of faith into a mockery of itself. Jezebel and Ahab killed Naboth; they didn't even have to do it themselves. They did it through the people who went right along with it, his old neighbors who sold themselves out. That may be the saddest part of this story. The narrator lays it out bit by bit, blow by blow.

"Proclaim a fast," they said. The people proclaimed a fast.

"Set Naboth at the head of the table." They set Naboth at the head of the table.

"Accuse him of cursing God and the King." They accused him of cursing God and the King.

"Take him out, and stone him to death." They took him out, and they stoned him until he was dead.

It was like a new religion was born right then, when the people of God traded in faithfulness to the way of God in the frenzy of the hollow and temporary, favor of the ruler. How sad, and yet, how unsurprising. It's astonishing how quickly masses of God's people will turn against God and the vision for what the church and nation should be in the name of God and a mockery of what the nation can be. In 1976, Jim Wallis commented on the place of faith as necessary outsiders with words of warning that still ring true:

"What matters most today is whether one is a supporter of establishment Christianity or a practitioner of biblical faith. Establishment Christianity has made its peace with the

established order. It no longer feels itself to be in conflict with the pretensions of the state, with the designs of economic and political power, or with the values and style of life enshrined in the national culture. Establishment Christianity is a religion of accommodation and conformity, which values realism and success more than faithfulness and obedience.” (Wallis, 1976, 1)

By the end of the story, in the name of new religion established at the word of the king, Naboth is dead. At the word of the king, by the hands of his neighbors, in the name of nation and God, but this is not the end of the story. The true God, the true God, the God of neighbors and enemies, the God of vineyard and soil and land, mountains and sea, the God of truth telling, the God in whose eyes all things are known visible and invisible... God is not dead, and God is not mocked.

Elijah steps out from the shadows, and Ahab inquires: “Have you found me, O my enemy?” And one has to wonder, is he talking to Elijah or straight to God?

Naboth may be dead, but his memory is eternal, and God is not dead.

Christ’s life, death, and resurrection have brought victory over the powers of darkness. He shattered the myth of their absolute authority by demonstrating his freedom in relation to them, even freedom to the cross. He challenged their rule and would not submit to them. The cross symbolizes that freedom in which death is swallowed up in victory. Christ’s resurrection seals his victory and allows the church to live freely and humanely in the midst of their power by being in Christ. This must forever be the proclamation and witness of the church of Jesus Christ. The church is a force in history which in word and deed, in bread and wine, with hands and feet, is a sign that the ultimate dominion of the power of this present age has been broken.

In this world, Ahabs and Jezebels can bulldoze over the poor and vulnerable. They can build all the altars and Asherahs they can dream of to all their idols. They can stand on the highest point in the highest building at the highest peak of the world; they can bid minions at their command. But they cannot change the one thing they’d most like to change: God is still God, and they are not. God has not changed. God’s special care for the poor, the vulnerable, the murdered and martyred, the beaten down and beaten up. God’s special rage against all who make themselves god-like of a new religion. There is a God before whom no secrets are hid, a God before whom all the thoughts and intentions of the heart are open and revealed. A God to whom the ground cries out with the blood of Abel and Naboth and the martyred and the lynched and Jesus Christ.

Oh, that God’s way would not be an enemy of our ways. Though we confess, as it’s been said, the line between church and world, God’s ways and our waywardness runs right through the middle of each of us.

At Elijah's word of justice and judgment, Ahab crumbles. To his credit. Ought we all. He tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejected, and God saw him, a man broken in confession of his sin. It's easy to be callous about his repentance—Naboth is still dead, and nothing is said about restorative justice of returning the vineyard to Naboth's family. Yet still—even in this terrible story, there is a hopeful sign that people, even the worst—and us, even at our worst, can feel something and can be open to God's renovation of the heart. There's hope for everyone. This is our conviction and our witness, too: there's hope for *everyone*. We are not fated to continue paths we are walking. Choices can be made. God can be served.

The bread and wine on the table of our Lord are reminders of this--the blood of Christ spilled for the sins of the world and of ours. By the sign of this bread and this cup, we participate in the life of Christ in the world today, given grace and courage to walk in his steps and in the sacred steps of all those before us, who have walked with him and who show us the way.

May our hearts be open. May our eyes be open. May we see the resurrected Christ at work within us and among us for the good of the world and the glory of God. Amen.

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