

“Vineyard or Vegetable Garden”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. 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." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." 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. His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" 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.'" 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." 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. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; 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." The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead." 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." 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. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: 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. 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." 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, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel... (1 Kings 21:1-21a)

It was some 900 years before Christ. The ancient Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Ahab was the king of the northern kingdom, Israel. Modern day historians may raise some questions, for there are no surviving documents to

represent the other side of the story, but according to the Book of Kings, Ahab was not a good king. No. He married Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, the daughter of the King of Tyre. I acknowledge, marrying a foreign woman was not necessarily something that would invite a favorable comment. Yet, that probably was what most kings did back then, as a means of forming or reinforcing an alliance with neighboring kingdoms and, thus, procuring political support. If the Bible refers to Ahab as being evil in the sight of the Lord, actually more so than all the kings before him (1 Kings 16:30), it certainly was not simply because he married a foreign princess.

As our first lesson today, we have a fascinating story, with a fascinating plot, and fascinating characters, King Ahab of Israel and his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, and their next-door neighbor, Naboth.

The seat of the northern kingdom was in Samaria, and, of course, Ahab had his royal residence there. Yet, Ahab also enjoyed spending time at his second palace, which was in Jezreel, to the north, in lower Galilee.

One day, while in Jezreel, Ahab saw the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. It was a lovely vineyard, which gave him an idea. Ahab wanted that vineyard. He wanted to turn it into a vegetable garden and have it annexed to his palace. Oh, yes, a vegetable garden! He really liked the idea.

So, Ahab calls in Naboth and says, *"Give me your vineyard. I'll give you a far better vineyard, or if you'd prefer, I'll pay you money for it. Name your price."*

There is no coercion apparent, and the offer seems reasonable, fair, even generous, don't you think? Nothing seems problematic here. However, Naboth did not live in the capitalist world as we do. Naboth did not live by the rule of the highest price. Naboth lived in God's world, by the rule of God, who alone is the real owner of the vineyard. King Ahab may have forgotten this, but for Naboth and his people, the land was a gift from God entrusted to them and their family, and not a capitalist investment.

Moreover, you may be aware that in different places in the Bible, a vine or a vineyard is the metaphor used to describe God's people. In contrast, a vegetable garden was a symbol of the land of bondage. In Deuteronomy (11:10), the term is used to describe Egypt in contrast to the promised Land. Turning a vineyard into a vegetable garden was tantamount to transforming God's land into a land of bondage. So, faithful to his covenant with his Lord, Naboth refuses Ahab's request.

As for Ahab, he returns home and takes to his bed, sulking and depressed. We are told that his face stuffed in his pillow, he even refused to eat! How pathetic is this! A king in a palace, throwing a tantrum like a baby, because he did not get his way!

Anyway, this is when his wife, the Queen Jezebel, enters the scene. *"What's going on? Why are you so out of sorts and refusing to eat?"* she asks. Then, upon hearing Ahab's story, she says, *"Is this any way for a king of Israel to act? Are you not the boss? On your feet! Eat! Cheer up! I'll take care of this!"* Then, she goes into action. She takes up Ahab's royal authority and engineers a plot to kill Naboth. Our lesson contains an intriguing story of conspiracy and perjury. Yet, Jezebel makes sure that everything appears aboveboard. Yes, to have Naboth murdered, she uses the very law, the very judicial system, which was meant to protect the innocent and provide justice. Then, once Naboth is safely dead, Jezebel sends Ahab off to enjoy his new acquisition.

I don't know whether Ahab was aware of the scheme or not, but for sure, he did not have to do a thing himself. He did not have to know a thing about it. Without a word of questioning or concern about how his wife did what she did, off he went to take possession of the vineyard!

I don't know where you find yourselves in the story, or which character captures your imagination the most. I can picture millions of people in this country and around the world in Naboth's shoes. Their homes are foreclosed, their jobs taken away, and their family destroyed. What a shame! I am frustrated, upset, angry.

Yet, at the same time, I am fascinated by Jezebel. Please do not get me wrong. I am not condoning what she has done, which is downright evil. But what a strong, assertive, and independent woman! She did not let men dominate her! On the contrary! She is the one who controls and dominates! She is in charge! What a fascinating character!

However, as much as I am upset or fascinated, I am afflicted. I am afflicted, seeing myself in King Ahab. Just like him, I have more than what I need. Just like him, I still want more and better. And just like him, I am often unaware of what is happening around me. Or, maybe, I simply do not want to know. I often have a hunch that things are not right. But I do not speak up. I prefer the comfort of my possessions, achievements, and acquisitions. I am a part of the system, which in many different ways, is unjust and oppressive.

This is a tough story about which to preach, for me personally, because of who I am, of course, but also because of who most of us are, and because of the world we live in. Not just in Ahab's days, but still today, the powerful and rich can take away from the poor the little that they have. And this happens here in our nation, and on a larger scale, between the rich and poor nations of the world.

Today's story shows clearly where the mind and heart of our God is. When Ahab and Jezebel treat Naboth unjustly, it is not just him that they offend. They offend God. Our story ends with Elijah, the prophet, calling the king out on what he has done and warning him of the consequences of his actions. Yes, our God wants justice for the poor and powerless. Yes, our God cares for the innocent and faithful. No matter what is happening around, no matter what is happening within us, deeper still is that reality of God at work in God's vineyard.

Thanks be to God who comforts those that are afflicted! Thanks be to God who afflicts those that are comfortable! Thanks be to God!