

4th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

1 Kings 21:1-21a

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...

History has no shortage of stories of people taking possession of that which is not theirs to have. Nathaniel Sylvester, whose "faith and fidelity" we "commemorate" on the plaque directly in front of you in the choir loft, made much of his wealth importing and selling slaves from Barbados. In fact, Nathaniel

Sylvester included in his will the ownership of 23 slaves. Upon his death, his slaves were given away as casually as one would inherit a set of silverware or a cast-iron skillet. And make no mistake about it, Nathaniel Sylvester was not the only person on that plaque to have owned slaves. His grandson, Brinley Sylvester also owned slaves. As far as I can tell, at least four people are venerated on our plaque that were slave owners.

I wonder what the four pastors of this church whose tenures coincided with the reality of slavery on Shelter Island would have had to say about today's passage.

Or perhaps you've been bewildered, as I have been, at the six month prison sentence for the young Stanford University swimmer who decided to take possession of an unconscious young woman's body.

However, today's story from the book of First Kings uses a vineyard as the metaphor for lust. If you please, simply replace the vineyard for whatever person or thing you've seen coveted by yourself or someone you know.

Ahab was practically watering at the mouth. The vineyard looked so tasty. Its grapes looked juicy and delicious. Its vines were numerous and fruitful. There were no weeds. It was closely guarded and cared for. One glance at this vineyard told the observer that the vineyard must have been loved. For there would be no other reason to explain its exquisite condition.

Ahab wanted it. He wanted it badly. The vineyard he coveted was right next door; it was all he could see when he looked out his bedroom window in the morning. He and his wife Jezebel were the King and Queen of Israel and, so far, they hadn't the best track record in the world. They were nothing but trouble and today's story is, unfortunately, no different. This house was a second home for the king and queen, not unlike someone having a second (or third or fourth) house here on Shelter Island. Ahab was only in Jezreel occasionally, but when he was, he couldn't help but covet the vineyard. Just imagine the wine it would produce! He could practically taste it upon his lips.

He wanted it. He would have it. One way or another. You see, for Ahab, everything (and perhaps *everyone*) was perceived as a commodity whose ownership could be had if the price was right. Therefore, he approached Naboth, the vineyard's loving owner, and made him an offer. Two offers, actually. First he offers Naboth a "better" vineyard in exchange. Then Ahab offers him money.

But Naboth declines both offers. He does not want a "better" vineyard because, in Naboth's mind, there is no better vineyard. This is not a matter of money. This is his family's vineyard. This was a vineyard that had been in his family for generations. It was their narrative. It was their story. Imagine someone trying to offer you money for your beloved family photo album containing pictures and memories of loved ones long gone. If you think about that, you might have a taste of how Naboth felt.

Naboth stood his ground and said no.

And, therefore, Ahab did what any 4 year old child would do when denied that beautiful bicycle in the shopping store window: he went home, refused to eat, and wallowed in self-pity curled up in the fetal position on his bed.

His wife, Jezebel, found him in his pitiful state, mocks him for his childishness, and then decides to pacify him and find a solution. She, too, would have something to gain from this vineyard. Unfortunately, the only thing standing in between them and their new vineyard was Naboth, a commoner. No matter,

Jezebel thought, this is but a momentary inconvenience, something to be dealt with as one would swat away a fly or throw away a bad apple.

Jezebel effortlessly has Naboth falsely accused of treachery and sedition and Naboth is stoned to death. Naboth was innocent. His blood stained the streets. Ahab, smiling gleefully, decided to take a stroll in "his" new vineyard.

But God had taken notice (as God tends to do when injustices happen).

Elijah is waiting for Ahab at the entrance of the vineyard. Elijah tells Ahab that God has taken notice of his and Jezebel's dark dealings. In fact, in just a few chapters, Ahab and Jezebel have broken at least six of the ten commandments.

First, they have disobeyed the first commandment by worshiping the pagan god, Baal.

Then, they have disobeyed the second commandment by making a graven image of said Baal.

Then, they have disobeyed the sixth commandment by having Naboth murdered.

Then, they have disobeyed the eighth commandment by stealing the vineyard.

Then, they have disobeyed the ninth commandment by bearing false witness against Naboth.

Finally, they have disobeyed the tenth commandment by coveting Naboth's vineyard in the first place.

Ahab and Jezebel have maliciously and violently taken advantage of their power to get what they want at whatever the cost. They had no concern of the collateral damage. The image that comes to my mind is of Dr. Ian Malcom in Jurassic Park when he says that the scientists who created the dinosaurs were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn't stop to think if they should. Likewise, Ahab and Jezebel were seduced into the culture that has withstood the test of time, a culture that we'd be foolish to pretend doesn't exist in our world today, a culture that says "because I can have something, it means that I *should* have it." It's the culture that says my need or desire for something is the only thing that matters. Everything and everyone else be damned.

And so, Ahab and Jezebel meet a bloody end. As promised by Elijah on God's behalf, both Ahab and Jezebel die violently. Ahab goes into a battle one day cowardly disguising himself as a common soldier so that he is not targeted as the king. However, a stray arrow pieces his side and he dies a slow and painful death. His blood pours into the ground and the dogs lick up his blood after the prostitutes bathed themselves in it (bet you didn't learn *that* part of the story in Sunday school!). Likewise, Jezebel meets her end when she gets defenestrated (thrown out of a window) and, just as her husband, the dogs lick up her blood.

Basically, the Old Testament narrative is trying to make something clear to us. God is not on the side of those who abuse their power. God is on the side of those who are powerless. God is on the side of Naboth. God is on the side of the slave. God is on the side of the beggar. God is on the side of the immigrant. God is on the side of the farm worker in the third world country with little, if any, legal protection.

It is clear whose side, then, *we* should be on. We should be on the side of those who need people by their side. Ahab and Jezebel are the perfect example of what *not* to do. And I don't know about you, but I don't want my life to end by being thrown out of a window and then being licked up by dogs (or having prostitutes bathe in my blood!).

But that shouldn't be the reason that we avoid the behavior of Ahab and Jezebel. The reason we should disavow them is that their behavior, the behavior that justifies taking that which can be ripped from the helpless, is a behavior that violently opposes God's intended justice and righteousness.

You and I can easily be Ahab and Jezebel if we are not careful. In fact, just the other day, I realized that I have an Ahab tendency myself, although I try to convince myself that I'm really not that important as to make a difference.

If you ask my wife what my favorite fast-food vice is, she will inform you that it is Wendy's. Specifically, I love nothing more than a good juicy burger from Wendy's with their natural-cut fries and a Diet Coke to wash it all down with.

However, I learned some disturbing news a few weeks ago. I was at the Early Ministry Institute in Stony Point, NY and I learned that Wendy's has refused to join what's called the Fair Food Program. The Fair Food Program is a non-profit that partners with companies to encourage them to purchase food only from suppliers that abide by basic standards of labor rights for their farmers. Unfortunately, plantations around the world, places where the food you and I eat comes from, house workers who are, largely, defenseless. They work in terrible conditions and have no standards of law that prevent atrocities such as child labor, wage theft, sexual harassment, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, and even (in some cases) outright slavery. The Fair Food Program seeks to defend farm workers by encouraging others to boycott companies that do not adhere to their policies. Companies that have agreed to conduct their business with such standards and, in doing so, are partnered with the Fair Food Program are companies such as Walmart, Chipotle, Trader Joe's, Subway, Whole Foods, Burger King, and McDonalds.

However, Wendy's has consistently refused to join the Fair Food Program. Instead, they have stopped buying their tomatoes from Florida growers who adhere to just labor laws and now purchase their tomatoes from Mexico where there are few, if any, laws that protect farm workers.

Therefore, every penny I spend at Wendy's supports a company that profits from unjust working conditions. Every burger I buy and every potato fry I consume supports an institution that enables workers to be under-compensated, over-worked, and mistreated. All because I really like my Wendy's.

Now, this is very inconvenient news to me. I like Wendy's. I should have Wendy's. It looks so yummy and tasty. I must have it.

You know who I sound like? Ahab.

Maybe you've never stolen a vineyard. You've probably never owned a slave (unlike some people whose names are commemorated in this very sanctuary). However, if you're like me, you are part of a privileged society that often chooses not to look at the "Naboths" among us. As the church, you and I are called to stand with Naboth. You and I are called to acknowledge the ways in which we are, either knowingly or unknowingly, sustaining structures of greed, malice, and oppression.

I was in Riverhead the other day getting supplies for yesterday's men's breakfast here in our fellowship hall. Before I stopped by Costco I decided to stop somewhere for a bite to eat. You know where I had lunch?

Wendy's.

Folks, it's not easy. Almost without realizing it, I had made the decision that my desire for a burger (this particular burger) outweighed the safety and fair compensation of the farm worker who had produced the very tomato that sat upon my burger.

Today's passage from the book of First Kings, this story of Naboth's Vineyard, reminds me that I am called to *do better*. I am called, as are you, to lean towards justice in a globalized world that makes it all too easy to lean the other way.

So, think twice before you eat Wendy's until they join the Fair Food Program. But more importantly, let us make sure that our eyes are open and our hearts are mindful of the ways our actions affect others.

There are many Naboths in this world, perhaps on this very island, that need God's justice. Let us not be like Ahab and Jezebel. Let us *be* the Church and demand God's justice.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.