

## *Caught in the Act*

1 Kings 21.1-20

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Our Hebrew text tonight, appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary, is for the preacher what in baseball parlance is referred to as a “gopher ball.” No matter which way you choose to swing, homiletically speaking, with this story of land thievery and dispossession in the Middle East you’re apt to clear the bases, particularly given the context of this conference. We could start with Joshua’s band and the Canaanites, or speak of the various conquests, occupations, and exiles under Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. We could consider the Byzantine Empire or the conquest by the Arabs and the rule of the Caliphs. Or we could consider the Crusaders, followed by the Ottomans and then, perhaps most cynical of all, the mandate of the Western powers after the First World War that carved up these vineyards of countless Naboths for absentee landlords clinging to the last gasp of European colonial rule.

Or, if we wished, we could turn our attention to generations of Naboths living in the urban ghettos and rural villages of Eastern and Central Europe, dispossessed regularly of property and life in the successive pogroms that led on the one hand to the rise of Zionism and, on the other, to the ultimate dispossession not just of land and life but even of culture and people-hood in the Holocaust. And from this, depending on your point of view, we could move on to more possession and dispossession in the eternal sanctuary of Statehood for some, the relentlessly recurring pain of the Nakba for others.

Naboth is eternal, dispossession eternal, Ahab eternal, Jezebel eternal. They keep reappearing in different guise. And they are here and they are now. Too many fields are adjacent – geographically, ideologically, strategically. Think of synagogue and mosque at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in ugly Hebron where Palestinian and Jew for decades have taken and lost, possessed and dispossessed, where soldiers and companions monitor trespassing and eye one another with suspicion from adjacent streets. Think of the Holy Sepulchre where Greek and Latin and Armenian Christians diligently and sometimes violently guard adjacent space and time, ready to pounce if one oversteps. Think of the Old City where Dome and Wall compete to

surmount or enclose the same land and much of its shared history. Think of expanding settlements and connecting roads and home demolitions and separation barriers and checkpoints that turn ancestral vineyards and villages, once adjacent, into inaccessible places, family homes into rubble, turning the adjacent into a kind of no-man's land that no one can occupy. Think of rockets that announce "If I can't have your garden, I will make it so you can't live in it either." And yes, think of blockades that leave the land in Naboth's possession, but deprive him of the means to make it flourish.

There is no subtlety to what Ahab and Jezebel are doing, no façade of self-justification, unless the offer of reparations for ceding the family legacy is an attempt. No, there is really nothing more than brute force, the exercise of power. The land is adjacent to mine; that's enough. Naboth surely knew that sitting down to negotiate with Ahab was useless, perhaps even that the offer of compensation couldn't be trusted. There are always enough scoundrels to fashion an excuse, to portray him in the worst possible light, to dispossess him first of his reputation, then his life, and ultimately his land. "Woe to those who add field to field and house to house," says the prophet, "until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!"

There could be a hundred prophets abroad in the land catching Ahab and Jezebel in the act, and the Naboths of this world would still be out-maneuvered, out-muscled, out-gunned. "Have you found me, O my enemy?" But lest this text become too easy for us, let us consider our own possessing and dispossessing. How else can we read the narratives that led to and from the Trail of Tears and all the tributaries that flowed into it? What of a Manifest Destiny that claimed much of Mexico and Puerto Rico and countless islands in the Pacific? Or closer to home, what else can we make of much of urban gentrification or of today's foreclosures that in many cases were not only cruel, but also demonically and deliberately clever?

And, to the matter at hand which has brought us all to Washington, what of our nation's stake in this little strip many call the Holy Land? There are far too many Christians for whom this is spiritually adjacent land to be possessed, taken up for use in our self-serving apocalyptic visions in which ultimately neither Arab Muslim, nor Arab or Jewish Israeli really has a future, and where all are Naboths. If it is not Christ who will come to take possession, then at least there are certain American Christians eager to claim it as a birthright. "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house." There are far too many of us for whom this is morally adjacent land to be possessed for atonement over centuries of anti-Semitism. Is it not true that we claim this land not just or perhaps even primarily for Jews needing a home but for the easing of our guilt-laden conscience? "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house." And for far too long our nation has eyed this as politically and militarily adjacent land, a more or less compliant vassal state to be possessed as a client serving our strategic interests in which Naboth counts for little.

“Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house.” Isn’t this what the Holy Land has become for *us*? Spiritually adjacent. Morally adjacent. Strategically adjacent.

“Is it you, you troubler of Israel? Have you found me, O my enemy?” Caught in the act. We are all in one sense or another caught in the act. The question of adjacency will be much on our minds in the next two days. Whatever road map ultimately is used in the journey toward peace with justice, it is a map that directs us across a landscape of adjacent claims and the relentless history of possession, dispossession and repossession, of exile and return. At any one moment it may be clear who is Naboth and who is Ahab or Jezebel, but across the long sweep of history none of us can escape Elijah’s chilling word: “I have found you.”

Of course we can’t ignore the land and the challenge of adjacent vineyards. Land is not just an economic value. It roots memories both healing and bitter. It holds rich cultural meaning. In the case of the Middle East it has enormous spiritual significance. And when threatening people are too adjacent its appropriation becomes a sought after source of security. Hitler called it “lebensraum” which ought to make us wary. Ultimately, of course, it is home. Home. And its proper distribution and its proper use is central to the establishment of an approximation of justice. No, we can’t avoid the question of land and any consideration of a two state solution and a shared Jerusalem and even a right of return inevitably means sorting out some kind of just and equitable adjacency.

But if sorting out land claims is all we are about then we, as church representatives, risk the pretense of posing as diplomatic emissaries playing Ahab’s and Jezebel’s land games with representatives of the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel. That is crucial and important work, and we must press our leaders to do this work. But it is not, fundamentally, *our* work if indeed we are *Churches* for Middle East Peace. Lest we become wannabe diplomats or self-righteous Elijahs we have a distinct kind of vocation to play in the search for peace, a vocation I hope we can practice this week.

It is, first, a vocation of prayer. “Our Father. . . , your realm come, your will be done, here as in heaven.” I’m not talking about our often brisk and superficial prayers for peace shoe-horned in between concern for Aunt Ida’s gall bladder and Uncle Joe’s drinking problem. I’m talking about sustained prayer that privileges God’s will for peace with justice, a will that often confounds our own expectations and sometimes even our own self-interest, a prayer that will make us extravagant in our desire for peace and modest in our own schemes for peace when vanity can so eagerly overtake us. Ours is a vocation of prayer.

Second, ours is a vocation of attentiveness to Naboth. It is not for us to preoccupy ourselves with the holy grail of “balance” every time we speak about the tortured history, the

agonizing present, or the uncertain future of the Middle East. The language of balance is a tightrope without a net and subjects us to a distracting manipulation that gets us nowhere. It is for us instead to concern ourselves, to preoccupy ourselves with Naboth, with every Naboth who is overlooked and forgotten when the land deals are taking place. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Naboth today is the church’s primary concern, our deepest loyalty, and we must stand with him and speak for her with courage. At any given time, perhaps even today, the Naboths may reside more in one community than in another and we must not ignore that reality, or shy away from that responsibility even if it exposes us to charges of privileging one side over another. But ultimately ours is a vocation of relentless attentiveness to every Naboth whether Palestinian or Israeli, Muslim, Christian, or Jew.

And finally, ours is a vocation that points beyond the adjacent claims of land to a source of security and peace beyond possession and repossession. “And I saw the New Jerusalem, coming down from God,” says the seer John. Its protective gates will be open all day in a place that knows no night. Glory will flow from it and enter into it in a commerce of doxology that is not the exclusive claim of Jew or Gentile, but the ultimate responsibility of both. It is not escapism to bear witness to this vision, an otherworldliness that consigns this world to its sin. It is in fact the most “real” thing we can do, setting before the world a vision that can animate not only our imagination, but also our deeds and that, in the end transcends this question of yours and mine and adjacency. Walter Brueggemann puts it well: “Our prophetic vocation is to keep alive the ministry of imagination, conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the one the king would have us believe is the only one thinkable.”

Read through the lens of history, tonight’s text suggests that whenever there is a nearby vineyard, there will be an Ahab, abetted by a Jezebel, eager to seize it. All of us, sooner or later, get caught in the act. Thus the need in life this side of the kingdom for structures of law and agencies of security to restrain evil, defend the weak, and work for the approximation of justice. But something else is needed as well. And that is hope. Hope rooted in prayer. Hope for the desperate Naboths victimized again and again. Hope for a realm of peace where the traffic of glory and grace moves freely in and out of the Holy City which is to say every city. Hope. That’s our vocation. If we don’t bring it to this intractable conflict, who will?

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