

## “Found”

Religious faith is about stories that shape and define us. They are stories we know: the story about the ultimate triumph of self-giving love as embodied in the life, death and continuing life of Jesus Christ; the story of the challenge of living in a community of love as reflected by the struggles of the early church to bridge ethnic and theological differences—a struggle continued and amplified in our own time; the story that God never gives up on us, that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God; the story that tells how the circle of God’s love keeps getting bigger and bigger; and the story told and lived by Martin Luther King Jr. and many others that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

These stories unfold in narratives that we return to again and again. We can never exhaust what they have to say to us because every time we return to them is a different time and we are different people. These stories that shape and define us are like a beautiful diamond: a slight change of perspective yields a whole new vision.

A stunning case in point is the story of Naboth’s vineyard, which we encounter in I Kings 21. This ancient story calls us back again and again. Here we meet ourselves. Here we are found.

It is part of the Elijah saga, which at its heart is a protracted wrestling match between Ahab, the king of Israel and Elijah, the prophet of the LORD, YAHWEH. King Ahab is married to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess who insists upon clinging to her native traditions and promoting worship of the god Baal even within the courts and palaces of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Ahab and Jezebel are a powerful team. Pitted against them is Elijah, whose name means “YAHWEH is God.”

A drought brings the conflict into full public view. Fertility is Baal’s domain, but Elijah the prophet of YAHWEH declares the drought and Baal appears powerless to end it. There is a showdown on Mount Carmel between four-hundred-fifty priests of Baal and Elijah, the solitary prophet of

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<sup>1</sup> While Jezebel’s reputation in the biblical narrative is universally bad—she is accused of “sorceries and harlotries”—she was clearly a powerful political figure. Worship of Baal enjoyed a considerable following within Israel, and her personal fortune was sufficient to support large numbers of priests and prophets. As a daughter of the ruler of Sidon, she was accustomed to power and could make good on what she threatened. Elijah never makes the mistake of underestimating her.

YAHWEH. They call on their respective deities to make fire to consume a sacrifice in front of a gathered crowd. Baal fails, YAHWEH consumes the sacrifice with fire and Elijah calls on the crowd to slaughter the priests of Baal. Following the carnage, the drought comes to an end with a great storm. Jezebel promises to avenge the slaughter of her priests. Elijah flees for his life and hides out in a cave.<sup>2</sup>

Today's story begins, "Later the following events took place." It might as well read, "once upon a time." Elijah is still a fugitive, a price on his head from Jezebel. It looks as though Elijah won the battle with the priests of Baal but he's losing the war for influence in Israel. King Ahab has reason to believe the coast is clear for him to do whatever he wants. But that's not quite true.

At issue is a vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. He lives in the town of Jezreel, located in a pleasant, fertile valley. His family has always lived there on the same plot of land going back to the tribal allotments made following the exodus from Egypt. In the view of the religiously devout like Naboth, people do not even really own land; the land is entrusted to us by God. So two very different world views are about to collide: everything is for sale; and this is God's land, not mine to relinquish... at any price.

Location, location, location: one of Ahab's palaces, the winter palace, is in Jezreel. (His primary residence is in Samaria.) This winter palace in Jezreel is adjacent to Naboth's vineyard. So Ahab makes an offer: money—fair market value—or an alternative vineyard. But Naboth isn't selling. Ahab is disappointed. He looks out his window and imagines a great vegetable garden: peas and beans and squash and tomatoes and zucchini: man, that zucchini! He's got to have that vineyard. But still Naboth will not sell: "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

So then—and don't you just love this—Ahab pouts. He lies down on his bed, turns his face to the wall, refuses to eat and sucks his thumb. It's pathetic. His only referent for not getting what he wants goes back to when he was five years old... so he acts like he's five years old. Jezebel has seen this before. The daughter of a king and the sister of princes, she knows her husband needs some bolstering. *What's the matter with Snugglebunny? Why is my little Snooky-Wooky all saddy-wadd?* Ahab sticks out his lower lip: Snooky-Wooky is all saddy-wadd because that icky old Naboth won't let him have his vineyard. Jezebel knows how to deal with situations like this.

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<sup>2</sup> More on this next week. Inexplicably the lectionary gives us these stories out of order this year.

“Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; [your favorite cartoon show is on]; I will get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” Just don’t ask me how.

Jezebel knows how to play hardball. She gets some royal stationary and writes letters in Ahab’s name—something she may have done with some regularity.<sup>3</sup> She seals them with the king’s seal. She sends them to some local functionaries and tells them to announce a fast and then make Naboth the guest of honor at the meal to follow, the break fast... maybe a prayer breakfast. Then she arranges for two “scoundrels,” a couple of her flunkies, Dumb and Dumber, to sit across from Naboth. In front of the whole crowd they leap up and accuse Naboth of cursing God and the king: blasphemy and treason right there in front of God and everybody. So of course the only reasonable thing for these upstanding, God-fearing, king-loving folks to do... is to take Naboth outside and teach him a lesson by stoning him to death. He’ll never curse God and the king again, that’s for sure!

How culpable is Ahab in all of this? Does he know what is being done in his name and under his authority? If he doesn’t know, it’s only because he’s trying not to know. Because of a minor inconvenience to a person of great power—simply being in the wrong place—Naboth loses his life, and he’s about to lose his inheritance. It’s the king’s appetite vs. the poor man’s life and legacy.

Jezebel reports to Snooky-Wooky that icky old Naboth has met a timely end. He won’t be around to object when the king takes over his vineyard. And, after all, this is the least Naboth could do for all the aggravation he has brought to the royal personage. Ahab is so excited about the big day that he borrows a pair of overalls and poses on a John Deere tractor to have his picture taken just before they level the vineyard.

“It’s amazing how all this worked out,” he thinks to himself. “What a woman I married!” And then he looks up and sees Elijah. Their exchange is legendary. Ahab says, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” Elijah has not only found Ahab, he has found him out. God has brought the word about Ahab who has killed and now is taking possession. God has pronounced judgment on Ahab, and Elijah has appeared to deliver the verdict. Elijah says, “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...” Powerful words: “you

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<sup>3</sup> In the view of some scholars, Jezebel is acting well within her normal authority in this instance. So writes Gale Yee in an article on Jezebel in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3. New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 849-849.

have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD.” And what was Ahab’s price? What would compel him to shatter God’s commandments, to murder and steal? He wants a vegetable garden.

To his credit, once he realizes that he has in fact been found, Ahab repents. In sackcloth and ashes he expresses his remorse in a public way: no shifting of blame, no cover-ups, no “mistakes were made” sort of language. God is moved by Ahab’s repentance, and God relents. But actions have consequences. Ahab’s dynasty, like a house built on a rotting foundation, will crumble with Ahab’s sons.

This story points us in two very different directions, depending on where we focus. First of all, it assures us that God cares. No act of injustice done to even the most humble person is ignored by God. Widows and orphans and the poor are particularly cared for by God. The true purpose of government is to protect the powerless, not to exploit them. God in the person of the prophet stands as a check on royal authority. Kings of Israel are different from other kings. They are accountable. When we focus on Naboth, the story reassures us, and calls us to stand up for the powerless, as well.

But when we focus on Ahab, the story cautions us. To be found by God is also to be found out. Here we see clearly the perils of privilege: nothing is worse for us than giving us everything we want, which makes us petty, peevish and petulant. We get to the point where we can’t distinguish between an appetite and a legitimate claim: I want it, so I should have it... even at the expense of someone else.

It is painful to think about the relationship between our appetites and the lives and livelihoods of so many people around the world. We enjoy cheap bananas and coffee; cash-starved countries skew their economies and ruin their environments to grow them for us. We love cheap electronics and clothing and running shoes; and don’t particularly want to know about the conditions under which they are produced.

And, like Ahab, our actions have consequences that, once set in motion, continue beyond our control. I think about that when I reflect on the huge smudge of oil on our fragile planet, by now large enough that it can be seen from space. It keeps growing and we are powerless to stop it. That very powerlessness elicits rage. We’re eager to assign blame, and there’s plenty to go around. BP is easy to blame as a symbol of greed. But we all love our cheap oil. We love our cars and comforts and conveniences. We take for

granted living and consuming at a level utterly beyond what the earth could sustain for its whole population. And our appetite comes with a price.

It's a modern dialogue between profits spelled with an "i-t" and prophets with an "e-t". "Have you found me, O my enemy?" "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."

It is only when we hold these two messages together that a hopeful challenge emerges. If God cares about every act of injustice, God also cares about every act taken for justice. Everything we do to live more simply so that others may simply live, matters.<sup>4</sup> Every effort to learn more about how our appetites impact the lives of others makes a difference.

The timeless story of Naboth's vineyard calls us not to "sell ourselves to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD," not to pursue privilege at the expense of others, not to ignore the prophetic mandate to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." May this story continue to shape our lives in faith and how we live upon the earth.

Amen

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<sup>4</sup> This quotation is variously attributed to Mohandas Gandhi and Mother Theresa.