

1 Kings 21:1-21 “Who Gets the Last Word?”

Before we dive into our lectionary text this morning, I want to say a few things about last week’s Pentecost in the Park. As is customary, Pastor Janice read Acts 2 which describes the events in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. But rarely do we say much about it because we choose to focus on music, testimonies and food rather than a sermon. I just want to point out that last week was a truly Pentecostal experience, not that we spoke in tongues like Pentecostal churches do, but I think we captured the spirit of what Pentecost is about. We had four very different congregations represented in one place. On the day of Pentecost in first century Jerusalem, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic crowd received the Holy Spirit and experienced a time of unity. What separated them made no difference whatsoever. That’s what I felt last week. For about two hours, we were undivided, and it was beautiful. Big thanks to everyone who pitched in and made this such a special event.

Now, on to this week’s scripture lesson. We’re in the book of 1st Kings, where the spotlight shines on King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Uh-oh, we know what that means!. Don’t worry, I’m going to give you the standard disclaimer I use any time I preach from 1 Kings. This passage is about a 7th Century BC Israeli king named Ahab. According to notes in my study bible, Ahab is “remembered as one of Israel’s most notoriously wicked kings.” I just want to remind you about *who* this is about, in case you think I’m being “political.” But I also want to remind you that much of the Old and New Testament *is* “political” especially as it relates to “Kings, rulers and potentates.” You’ve got scathing critiques of the Egyptian Pharaohs at the beginning of the Bible, and of the Roman Caesars at the end. How can we understand what the Kingdom of God *is* if we don’t mention what it *is not*?

Anyway, the story starts out with a man named Naboth who had a vineyard in a place called Jezreel. King Ahab approached Naboth and said, “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.” That sounds like a reasonable offer, doesn’t it? There is nothing *here* that indicates Ahab is an “evil” king. It sounds like he just understands the art of the deal. If you’ve never heard of Ahab and this is the first time you read about him, you’d think, “Yeah, I mean, for goodness sake, he eats his veggies. How can you hold anything against a guy who makes an effort to eat healthy?” Naboth, however, declined the offer, and for a good reason. This piece of property is part of his ancestral heritage. It was passed down to his family over many generations and he wants to pass it on to his children and their children. So he says, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Ahab was disappointed. He *really* wanted that prime piece of fertile land so he could grow his veggies. But did he invoke “eminent domain” and take it even though the owner didn’t want to sell it? No, he did not. Was he happy about Naboth’s decision? No, he was not. So Ahab went home to sulk. He was “resentful and sullen” as the author of 1 Kings states. How bad was his resentment? “He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.”

Confession time – I don’t always take disappointment well. Perhaps *I* would have done the same thing as Ahab except I would have eaten. My favorite “sulking food” is ice cream - Ben and Jerry’s “Chunky Monkey” to be specific. Ahab’s wife Jezebel finds him sulking and says, “Why are you sulking?” Ahab says, “Because I didn’t get what I wanted.” She said, “Good grief, you’re the King of Israel! You are still king, right? Then get out of bed, get something to eat and cheer up!” That sounds like a reasonable plan too. I know a lot of wives who would say the same thing. Heck, on many occasions, Mary has gone to Safeway to buy me a pint of Chunky Monkey to cheer me up. And I’ve bought her many pints of Chubby Hubby to cheer her up. When the world knocks you down, get up and get some ice cream. But that’s not what Jezebel did. After she told Ahab to get out of bed and eat, she said, “Let me take care of this” with the implication that if he’s not going to wield his God-given power as a king, then she’s going to play the queen card.

Her plan? Frame Naboth for a crime he didn't commit, have him tried and executed and then take his land. She then went out and successfully carried out this plan. Wow. And you thought I was going to pick on Ahab this week. Some of you might be thinking, "No, you're going to blame the woman and say, 'See? This is why you shouldn't trust a woman!'" No. I know better than that. I've been in ministry for almost 40 years. I may be foolish at times, but I'm not stupid. I *will* give Jezebel some credit - she did not kill Naboth herself, nor did she forcefully take his vineyard. But she did devise a cover-up that *appeared* to comply with Jewish law. *Technically* speaking, there was no blood on her hands. I'm not outright blaming her, but I'm not letting her off the hook either. It may *appear* that Ahab isn't the villain in this story, but he's going to discover that the prophet, who had been a constant thorn in his side from the day he was crowned, has something different to say about the matter.

Who is this prophet? Elijah! Elijah is second only to Daniel on my list of "favorite prophets" in the Old Testament. "What? Not Micah or Jeremiah?" Sure, I appreciate them, but Daniel and Elijah were the superheroes of the Old Testament. All the other prophetic books focus on words. Daniel and Elijah focus on deeds. They're the ones out there solving mysteries and getting into contests with the prophets of Baal and getting thrown into lion's dens. Elijah was a flawed human who dealt with chronic depression. He had serious imposter syndrome. He never felt like he was up to the task even though he had many victories when he was out in the field. I like him because he's easy for me to connect with. In the same way that the Joker is Batman's arch nemesis and Lex Luthor is Superman's, Ahab was Elijah's arch nemesis. But when Elijah came onto the scene, it wasn't Jezebel he went after, it was Ahab.

There's something here worth noting here about how kings often don't do evil things right out in the open. Sometimes they're very sneaky and subtle. This is going to sound a little weird, but honestly I'm strangely okay with the ones who do things out in the open. Some telegraph their intentions long before they do anything, and they only surprise the people who don't believe they'd do it in the first place. With those kind

of kings, I at least know where they're coming from and what their intentions are. It's the sneaky ones who try to look like they're doing good things for the people, but really aren't that I worry about. Ahab was kind of a mixture of both. Sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious. You never knew. Prophets, on the other hand, aren't subtle at all. Elijah's biggest beef with Ahab was how arrogant he was and how he used his royal power against the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Elijah openly condemned Ahab's injustice. Yeah, but this was all about Jezebel, right? She's the one who framed Naboth and arranged for his death so Ahab could have his eggplants and fava beans. But Ahab was king. The buck stops with him. And by this time in the narrative of First Kings, Ahab had done some horrible things as the monarch of Israel. Just because Israel is the religious and cultural center of the Jewish people, does *not* mean that kings like Ahaz and other leaders throughout its history represent God or God's agenda. But thank God for the Elijahs and the Daniels and Obadiah's and Micah's and Jeremiah's and other prophets who spoke truth to power and called for justice.

In the end, the truth will *always* come out. Unjust powers will not have the last word in our broken world. Even when innocent people suffer or die, God still speaks through prophetic voices today, standing up for them and seeking justice on their behalf. The God who intervenes is the God who is determined to act with justice and might on behalf of the oppressed. God has promised never to leave or forsake the weaker members of *any* society – past, present, or future. A theme that runs through the entire body of scriptures that we call the Bible is the willingness of this God to intervene on behalf of the downtrodden and abused, and yes that intervention is often demonstrated through the prophetic voices of people like Elijah. Though we may despair over pain and injustice in our world, we can trust that God sees what is happening and is working through God's people to bring justice. God is indeed the God who sees and sets things right. Humans may temporarily appropriate and thwart the just purposes of God, but in the end, God will have the last word. God *will* prevail.