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Hope in the Vineyard
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For me, there are two messages that bubble up from this story of Naboth's vineyard. The first is: don't be like Ahab and Jezebel. As important as that message is, as good as it feels to throw that message at people sometimes, there's a more interesting message in the story. That message, to quote my Older Testament professor Carolyn Pressler is, "God's justice will not be denied forever." We'll talk about this.

Last week King Ahab was chasing Elijah and chased Elijah to the mountain of God. There, Elijah encountered God in the silence and was told to stop running and get back in the game. Elijah did. In the meantime, King Ahab, worst of the worst of the kings of Israel, dealt with a foreign policy crisis, but, shockingly, didn't deal with it appropriately. God is upset with Ahab and Ahab goes home "resentful and sullen."

Ahab decides that what will cheer him up is a new vegetable garden. Nothing wipes away the stresses and pressures of the royal life quite like spending time in a vegetable garden. Ahab looks out the window and sees the perfect spot for his new vegetable garden, in a vineyard right next to the palace.

Ahab doesn't own this vineyard, but that's no problem. He has lots of money, and he'll offer lots of money to the owner of the vineyard. This story is about a business transaction between unequal partners. The story of Naboth's vineyard happens all the time. Ahab approaches Naboth, the owner of the vineyard, and gives him a fair deal. "Naboth, since your vineyard is right next to my house, I want you to give it to me so that I can plant some tasty vegetables. In return, I'll give you a vineyard that's even better than this one. Or, if you would like, I'll give you cold hard cash, fair market value. What do you say?"

And Naboth says, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

There are a few things to notice before we move on. First, there’s some foolishness embedded in Ahab’s request. Don’t get me wrong, I’m an advocate of vegetable gardening. Wherever I see a lawn of green grass, I see a vegetable garden waiting to be born. But, it’s foolish to rip up a vineyard to put in a vegetable garden. A vineyard takes years to establish, and once established it will produce for generations. A vineyard is a valuable asset. A vegetable garden is the fast food of the ancient world. You can put it anywhere and with a little effort it produces immediately, it’s no big deal. When the prophets dream dreams of the promised land they dream of a land filled with vineyards, not vegetable gardens. Ahab wants to tear down a building on the register of historic places and put up a shiny new McDonalds.

That alone might be enough for Naboth to protest. But when he says this vineyard is his ancestral inheritance, he tells King Ahab that his offer is against the law. Israelite law stipulated that ancestral estates should remain within the family or within the clan. This is another law in ancient Israel that guarded against the concentration of wealth. This prohibited one tribe from becoming more powerful than another by being able to take the land of another tribe. If this land is given you by your ancestor, it is yours, end of story.

For once Ahab does something right. He realizes he is up against the law of God and he backs down. But poor Ahab is heartbroken. He really wanted that vegetable garden. He flops down on his bed and if he can’t eat vegetables from his own vegetable garden then he’s not going to eat.

Ahab’s wife Jezebel enters, asks Ahab, “Why the long face?” Ahab tells the story of how his hopes for a new vegetable garden were dashed by Naboth and the law of God. And Jezebel says, “Aren’t you the king of Israel? Man up, Ahab, this is embarrassing. I’ll get you your precious vegetable garden. Leave everything to me.”

Jezebel assumes the king’s power and starts writing letters in his name. She writes to the elders and nobles of Naboth’s town and lays out an elaborate plan for Naboth’s demise: a dinner, two scoundrels falsely accusing Naboth of charges punishable by death. Interestingly, no one objects. No one comes to

Naboth's defense. To get in the way of royal power is to die. The safe thing to do is to go along with Jezebel. The elders do what she asks, Naboth is accused, Naboth is stoned to death, and despite his innocence, he dies.

Jezebel tells Ahab, "You've got your vegetable garden." Ahab goes to claim it, and that's when God says, "Alright, that's enough."

What follows is the part of the story that is most troubling and most hopeful at the same time. God tells Elijah to proclaim an oracle of doom to Ahab, and it sure seems like God is the one who is orchestrating Ahab's demise. It looks like God is setting up an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth punishment for Ahab. As we worship a God of love and grace, this may trouble us. At these moments it may be helpful to remind ourselves that the Holy Scriptures were written by human beings in a particular place in time. Though it may bother us to see God going after the life of Ahab, it likely didn't bother the people of ancient Israel one bit to hear of God doing that. The biblical writer is getting to a deeper message through this part of the story and if we can hold this lightly we will be able to hear what the Biblical writer is trying to tell us. The message the Biblical writer is trying to get across is, "God's justice will not be denied forever. God hears the cries of the innocent. God notices the abuses of the powerful, and God responds."

As we move forward to the story of Jesus Christ, to crucifixion and resurrection, our central story, we proclaim the same good news: God's justice will not be denied forever, injustice will not have the last word. Now Ahab is Caesar and Caesar will not defeat the love of God. But here we make a bit of a shift. Rather than saying only that God hears the cries of the innocent, we proclaim in the crucifixion and resurrection that God is in the cries of the innocent. Wherever and whenever crucifixion happens, God is present. And the powers of God will not be overcome by the powers of greed and fear. After three long days, we will see the power of love again. After three long days we will see the powers of greed and fear losing their grip. After three long days we will see resurrection and we will know that God's justice will not be denied forever.

When I was in New Haven, CT, at this conference that dealt with Sacred Music and worship, I had some fascinating conversations about other things. The first day I was seated next to a priest, Father Maximo Tzul. Father Max is currently serving in Fon Du Lac, WI, but is originally from Totonicapon, Guatemala. In the course of our conversation I asked Father Max whether his hometown was heavily forested. He said, "Not anymore. Large corporations came in and clear cut the mountainsides to plant banana and coffee plantations. A handful of people own all the land and have all the money," he said. Father Max was telling me how Ahab and Jezebel came in and took Naboth's vineyard and planted a vegetable garden in his hometown in Guatemala.

Later I was talking with a layperson named Brian from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, VA. I asked him what he did with his life when he wasn't hanging out at church meetings. He shared that he works as a computer programmer for a defense contractor. It turns out he developed a program that scans news reports from around the world in an effort to predict where unrest is going to breakout next. I asked, "Did you see Syria coming, Turkey, Egypt?" "We predicted those conflicts six months out." I asked about Brazil because at the end of June, that was the new protest in the news. "He said we were only a few months early on Brazil. What is interesting about Central and South America," he said, "is that protests are sparked by a raise in transportation fees, or sanitation costs, but there's underlying resentment about land use and land rights that really fuels the protests." Brian was telling me in a different way what Father Max was telling me. Over and over Ahab and Jezebel have taken the vineyard and turned it into a vegetable garden.

It seems like the whole world is simmering right now. As I try to follow the news of unrest in various parts of the globe, what I read over and over saddens me, but also gives me hope. I'm saddened because I see crucifixion, and I know there will be more. But I'm hopeful because I see people crying out for justice. I see people demanding increased equality, I see people demanding elimination of corruption in government, and I see people demanding that their voices be heard. According to Isobel Coleman, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York, the millions who protested in Egypt did so in an attempt to reclaim the original goals of the revolution: bread, freedom, social justice, and human

dignity. This is Elijah coming to Ahab and Jezebel and saying, “God’s justice will not be denied forever. God has a different hope for how the world should be and you will not hold off the power of God’s love forever.”

As we watch Nelson Mandela’s amazing life draw to a close, we are reminded again that God can do amazing things over time. Mandela was in prison for 27 years, and when he was released he stepped not only into freedom but into the presidency. God can do amazing things when no one thinks anything is possible. This week the church received a call from two men who have been together for 32 years, and they want to get married, and this fall they can and this fall they will. We see evidence of God’s justice and love coming to the defense of the innocent and boldly doing new things. God’s love is like water on rock, over time it will carve its way through the impossible. Our work is to place our trust in God and to allow the steady, powerful love of God to give us hope. Our work is to share this hope with the world, with words, with our presence, and with loving action everywhere we go. God’s justice will not be denied forever. We are here because we believe this is true and this week we will go out into the world in love because we believe this is true. Amen.