

The dramatic, eventful incident described in today's Old Testament reading helps explain a lot!

Helps explain why you have never attended a Wedding Services where you heard a Pastor say: Ahab do you take Jezebel to be your lawfully wedded wife!

Helps explain why the nasty character in the novel, Moby Dick, is Captain Ahab!

Helps explain God's problem with deceitful uses of Eminent Domain to grab land from the poor or the vulnerable!

Helps explain that famous headline in the "Jerusalem Walls" Street Journal: "By 8-1 vote Supreme Court transfers Naboth's Vineyard to Ahab, Inc.: - sub-headline: "Ahab's Attorney Jezebel stresses job creation in the new construction."

Helps explain the dramatic and powerful intervention of Elijah – sticking up for the little guy, because that is what prophets do. Prophets stick up for the little guy, or the little gal, because God sticks up for the little ones, even in a case against the Big House, the Royal Household!

Helps explain why God is very concerned about activities today that beat up on the little guy, that "steal their vineyard", things such as:

State lotteries that promise untold riches, but which are funded by the desperate poor, who often spend their last dollar on a ticket in the hopes of a big win. Even when it's done in the name of a good cause like education or recreation, the effect of the lottery is to impose a heavy, regressive tax on the poor and the mathematically challenged.

Or Credit card companies or their kissin' cousins, Pay Day lenders, who charge sky-high interest rates for people who likely should have avoided the credit trap but who end up in a spiral of debt.

Or Large corporations who undercut the prices of local small businesses, reaping huge profits while paying their own employees minimal wages, leading to burdens on programs such as Medicare. This sorry, sordid, tale helps explain a lot about people's behavior towards one another, about the arrogance of power and the powerful, the sorry lot of those victimized by those who are in the know or who have the right connections!

Helps explain the meaning of Lord Acton's famous observation: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The story opens with a bored King Ahab wintering in his southern palace in Jezreel. In words penned by Mel Brooks, "It's good to be the King". Ahab can choose where to stay, to enjoy a more temperate climate living at a lower altitude than the capital city, Samaria. There, ensconced in his Winter Palace, Ahab, King Ahab, the guy in charge of the whole nation, notices a vineyard next to the palace and he decides that he wants it for himself. Ahab goes as an equal, as if a King is ever equal to his subject, and proposes a deal to vineyard's owner. Poor Naboth, he doesn't stand a chance - either way he will lose, say yes, he loses his vineyard, say no, and who knows what might become of him.

Before we get right into this story we need to acknowledge that at least in this story, most of us have more in common with Ahab than with Naboth, in our time and context, we are the ones with the power and influence, most of us need to approach this story listening and hearing what it is that is said by the prophet to Ahab. Yes, we may not like this but there is no alternative. Evidence for where it is we sit or stand in this story comes easily – for aren't we tempted to argue, that on the face of it, Ahab seems to make a pretty fair offer?

Ahab offers a vineyard swap –we could call it, “the cabernet for merlot strategy!” Or he offers cash – cash with his own picture on it – cash on the barrel for the land.

But, please don't go there! Don't believe this for a second. The truth of all of this is much more shadowy, murkier, coming from a scary figure in a position of power. I have to warn you, even back in those days, you couldn't always trust the word of the man in power, not even if he was the King of Israel, never mind someone who needed votes to hold onto power.

Nothing good can come of this because, for one thing, Ahab already has two palaces and still he isn't satisfied.

Nothing good can come of this because, with all respect to vegetables and vegetable gardens – they don't take the same length and level and intensity of care over the years as vineyards do. A vineyard, like an apple orchard, takes years of growing and maintenance to get any product worth talking about. It would be like me suggesting that you give me your new Chevy or your Lexus for my purple mini-van!

Nothing good can come of this because, Naboth is being asked not only to give up mere fields with vines growing in them, he is also being asked to give up his heritage. He is being asked to give up his birthright, the place where his family has worked and lived for generations. His great-grandparents' names are carved as a love heart in the older vines! This ol' place is in Naboth's blood, he grew up playing among these vines. This vineyard is his heritage, it tells his family's story - to sell out would be a betrayal of his inheritance. Further, Naboth trusted that this was his inheritance from Yahweh, Naboth's God – to trade away what had been given him by God was to distrust God's provision for Naboth and his descendents. In fact the name Naboth comes from the word for vineyard – his identity and purpose, his place in society was all wrapped up in his land – Naboth was the Vineyard Guy!

Nothing good will come of it because the very Law of God – the Law that King Ahab was meant to uphold, forbade the very thing that Ahab was proposing! The Law of God specifically stated: That the land was not to be sold forever; and further the ruler was not to take the inheritance of the people and no one was to remove the ancient landmarks!

Nothing good will come of it because Ahab wants the land for a “vegetable garden!” This may seem reasonable until we look closer at the subtle implication these words assign to Ahab's motivation. The term “vegetable garden” appears only one other place in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 11, where the naturally fertile land of the Promised Land is contrasted with the irrigated land of the Egyptians who had to water their vegetable gardens artificially. Quoting from Deuteronomy 11: “For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to

occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after.” In Israel’s imagination, vineyards are far superior to mere vegetable gardens. Vineyards were signs of God’s blessing and thrived naturally. Indeed Israel herself is referred to as a vineyard. Ahab’s proposed conversion of Naboth’s vineyard suggests that Ahab is turning his back on God’s promises; that Ahab is rejecting God’s blessing, the blessing God has placed upon the land and people of Israel.

Nothing good will come of it because after Naboth politely refused his offer, Ahab has a fit of the sulks. Since he couldn’t get his own way, he wouldn’t cooperate with anyone around him – the King was like a spoilt child.

Nothing good will come of it because Ahab had a foreign wife, Jezebel, her very name in honor of a foreign god. She had come to be Ahab’s “partner”, his “dominant partner”. Jezebel was not of the house or lineage of Israel or David or Abraham, she brought with her from home 850 priests. Now I hear you thinking: 850 priests - a tad excessive for saying the odd prayer and offering the occasional sacrifice. To the truly religious leaders in Israel this cadre of idol worshippers must have seemed like that year the Southern Baptist Convention held its annual meeting in Salt Lake City! Sure, at a previous religious spat on Mount Carmel, God and Elijah the prophet had sorted the problem of these pagan priests but Jezebel never forgave Elijah for ending her coup d’état. Jezebel added Elijah’s name to the terrorist watch list, he had to go into hiding. The Queen hunted for him, but Elijah’s own people thought of him as a freedom fighter, a hero, who stood up for the little guy and stood up for God. Ahab tucks himself in bed like he has the ‘wine flu and refuses to see anyone – he refuses to be the King! Jezebel seizes the moment to take charge, to exercise royal power. Her actions prove something we all do well to remember: in life there will always be someone who will tell you exactly what it is you want to hear, instead of what it is you really need to hear. Words such as: “Go ahead take your chance” or “You deserve it!” or “Take what you can, when you can” can all spell doom – if we listen to them.

Jezebel’s words: “Ahab, you are the King, you are a good man, you are a great man and you should have what you desire! Ahab dear, let me take care of it for you”, spell doom for Ahab and for her. Will you please, be on guard for people, who will say the easy, simple, thing; who will flatter you rather than confront you; who will excuse you, rather than point out your mistake; who will sell you a bill of goods that will take your eyes off your faith and your God, to distract or confuse or delude.

And so it was that Jezebel broke God’s heart. She forged a few letters and on a very special, religious, public occasion, a covered dish church supper no less, Naboth was denounced by false informers. He was taken into illegal custody by extraordinary rendition, well beyond the rights of habeas corpus, tried by a politically appointed prosecutor from the house of Ahab, by a stacked jury appointed from among the ranks of the Royal Vegetable Growers of Samaria. Naboth was quickly found guilty, and immediately stoned to death. And so it was that Ahab deigned to climb out of his bed to take possession of his new property, the vineyard that would soon be filled with bloomin’ onions! No regrets, no remorse, no repentance, no oversight, no opposition, no outrage, no problem! For Ahab, it was nothing personal – just business – the business of business – the business of power and politics and survival and getting ahead. In 2 Kings 9, we can read that Naboth’s sons were also executed at the behest of Jezebel. It was a bloodbath worthy of the mafia and within the justice of God this was the reason why Ahab, himself would soon, “swim with the fishes.”

Why, we might ask, did Jezebel follow this convoluted path to gain the vineyard? We know from the story that it was close by to the Palace, so why did she not just send a soldier in the night to cut Naboth's throat? Or send him a poisoned vegetable stew? Why did she deliberately involve all of these other people in an obvious injustice? Why not a simple, direct plan? Jezebel acted as she did, coldly, calculatingly, drawing into her dastardly scheme lots of unwitting accomplices. They were made co-conspirators by Jezebel, like Naboth they were "little guys." Guilty if charged, they became party to the cover-up.

Ahab was very, very pleased with his new acquisition. Ahab loved to tour his new property, to walk proudly showing off to his friends. He hired an architect to design an elaborate pathway that only he and his guests could use to walk from the palace, where soon vegetables would replace the vines.

And thus it was that Elijah the prophet found Ahab, strolling in what had been Naboth's vineyard. And thus it was that in what had been Naboth's vineyard, Elijah the prophet spoke God's word and God's truth, about and to Ahab and about Jezebel.

And thus it was that Elijah the prophet detailed all the lies and murder, and the guilt of many, promising that Jezebel would pay for her role in convincing Ahab to break God's Law.

And thus it was that Elijah the prophet offered Ahab the opportunity to face up to what he had done – selling himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Just when we think the story seems settled, just when we get thankful that although Naboth and his sons had been murdered, God has put things to right and Jezebel and Ahab will get what they deserved – just then Ahab accepts the word of God through the prophet and makes what must have been a dramatic and surely heartfelt repentance, as he tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, fasts and goes about dejectedly. Or does he?

Verses 27-29 would have you think so: When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster on his house." But the preceding verses 25 and 26 – noted by scholars to be an editorial comment, suggest that the comments about Ahab's repentance represent a royalist revision of the Ahab story and that the repentance may not have been real at all: (Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites.)

Whether Ahab repented you will have to decide for yourself, myself – I don't think he did! What is true is that the option to repent was open to Ahab and is to all of us. With God, the sinner always has another chance! But sin and disobedience always have implications, even if forgiven; punishment would still fall on the house of Ahab, a sign that the lives of Naboth and of Naboth's sons were redeemed by God.

Surely the message of this story is that we need to be looking to hear, receive and act upon God's message to us. Surely the message of this story is – don't mess with God, don't mess with God's Law,

don't neglect to do justice. Surely we can apply this story to our lives – not holding out on God, not imagining that we know best, not thinking that we should focus on getting but giving. Surely we see that we are being called to love mercy, to seek peace, to walk humbly with God, throughout all God's world, not claiming anything as ours because it is all God's; not excluding anyone but embracing, including, seeking and welcoming all of God's children. Surely we see that neglecting, disobeying, dishonoring God can only end badly – for any of us and all us! Surely we see that there is hope! Hope in Jesus Christ – hope in living the example of the woman had in her jar of perfume something of real value.

Ahab wanted all he saw for himself, in the presence of Jesus, the woman was willing to offer, to give away, what she had for the One who meant all to her. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving of ourselves that we receive, in dying that we are born to eternal life.

THE King, THE King of Israel, is not the One who made a land grab, who sought for Himself, the King of Israel is the one who became the victim, who gave up His life, laid down His life to redeem the whole human vineyard and all of us. This King of Israel has a purpose for us to live into – a purpose for each of us and a shared purpose for all of us, open to God's future, open to meet the needs of those in need, open to one another and open to the mighty power and love of God to be and do great things in the place to which God has brought us. Amen.