

## Naboth's Vineyard

### Sermon on 1 Kings 21: 1-28

An American Old testament scholar writes, << A person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he, before she, acquires an appetite for the big godly change in the world. The truth is that many people are comfortable with the reality. Some people tend to think that life is difficult, and there will be injustice and suffering for no cause or for a good cause. For some, it even becomes second nature to go along with the reality, to be quiet and passive. Many say they do not have the power to confront, overlooking the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and many others who had the courage to say, "Enough".

It is often forgotten that they also lacked resources, but nonetheless decided to take action and confront their own grievous situations. If we do not learn from history, we will continue to repeat the ugly past.

The forgotten narrative of Naboth's vineyard screams for justice. It shouts, "Enough! Something must be done." >>

Sisters and brothers, those of you who know me, know that I would be deeply attracted by such a quote and give the story mentioned above a very close and intensive look.

Ahab, the king, had asked a neighbour to trade or sell him a piece of land. Naboth had a vineyard near Ahab's country palace in Jezreel, a Jewish town. Ahab's other palace was in Samaria. Ahab, the king who had more than one could wish, longed for the only property of the man Naboth and his extended family.

Although Naboth was the oldest man in the family, he had no right to make a decision on his own whether to sell the land or not. Such a major decision might put the future security of the children of his clan at risk.

The law in old Israel required to keep the ownership of farmland within a family. Only in cases of extreme poverty land could be leased, but would be returned to the original owner in the year of jubilee. This was a practice of giving back land to the people and freeing people after 50 years so that no family would forever be forced to live in slavery, oppression and dependence.

I am not going into details on that now, but believe me, Naboth had his fair reasons for responding to Ahab's request with "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers..."

Ahab reacted to this response like a spoilt child. He went home sad and angry, and he refused to eat. Eventually his sulky behaviour attracted the attention of his wife, Queen Jezebel. She was a princess from a neighbouring country with other gods and a very different culture. Where she came from all the land belonged to the king and was only leased to the people. She either did not know or she refused to accept the old Jewish law.

She heard Ahab's story and took action.

Jezebel reminded Ahab clearly of who had the say in the land. "I will get you the vineyard," she said, and made a deceitful and aggressive plan to solving the problem. Ahab seems like an spoilt little boy whose mama takes matters in her hands. With

Ahab's permission Jezebel sent letters stamped with the king's seal to the elders of the town where Naboth lived. The letters asked the elders to come up with false charges against Naboth.

And as everywhere in this world there were people who would go any length to please someone in a position of leadership – no matter what the cost. The elders in Jezreel broke the law, carried out Jezebel's evil plot and sent a note to the king's palace that "Naboth had been stoned and was dead." And when we read our Bible carefully we find evidence that Naboth's sons had also been killed.

Far from protesting that Jezebel had misused his authority, broken the law, and had an innocent man and half of his family killed, Ahab simply accepted what she had done.

He set out to enjoy his new possession.

As God had done before, he sent his prophet Elijah to confront Ahab.

All the meetings between Elijah and Ahab had been hostile. Ahab saw Elijah as his enemy, not as a messenger from God. And the message this time was one of judgement on the house of Ahab: they would all receive their fair judgement and none of them might be left...

Hearing Elijah's words, the king repented, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. God showed mercy to Ahab and promised not to send the announced disaster.

So far, so good?

No!

Never!!!

Nothing is good here...

Nothing is good when half of a family is murdered for no other reason than the greed of the already richest man in the country, and the other half of that unfortunate family from then on had to live in slavery and misery.

Nothing is good when such things happen...

We have to read the story again and anew, and we have to look at it not with the eyes of the rich who seek a forgiving God, but with the eyes of the poor who must feel that God has forever abandoned them. Where is the God who loves the poor, feeds the hungry and cares for the persecuted?

Where is the God who...

... made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith for ever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin...

...the God of whom we heard in Almuth's brilliant sermon last Sunday?

Looking at the story of Naboth's vineyard here at Peace Church today, we know there must be more to come...

When I looked at the text with a researching eye I discovered that at the beginning the story in fact offers more information about Naboth than about anyone else. Naboth is the centre of the first part of the story. All actions surround him. He is the main actor. His name is mentioned more often than that of Ahab and Jezebel combined.

In the second part of the story Ahab gains more relevance.

There is a parallel between Ahab and Naboth.

Ahab moves from death to life. Naboth from life to death.

After Naboth's death the focus is on Ahab who is not innocent at all. He is later in the story charged of murder. But who did really kill Naboth?

The story we have here is a story of confrontation which holds a lot of oppression elements. The concept of the oppressor and the oppressed is clearly outlined. Also the notion of false witness. The powerful king desires the property of the weak, and in order to please his desires he corrupts the community. The abuse of power is evident. What happens is not only a fight between the king and Naboth, but a manipulation of a community which clearly is exploitative and corrupt. All of them have not only committed a crime against Naboth, but also a crime against themselves and against God.

The bloody little trick Jezebel used to reveal the hidden criminal potential of the system was to involve the community. She did not make the vineyard a personal matter. She could have sent the king's troops to simply execute Naboth. But no... she involved the "good for nothing" people, as she called them, who she assumed would do anything and had no morals. She trusted them to get the people together, set up the stage to convict Naboth of murder, and execute him. The community committed murder as a collective.

And again we have to ask the question: Who killed Naboth?

Who is guilty of Naboth's death? Those who stone him to death? Those who knowingly bear false witness against him? The elders who charge him? Jezebel who comes up with the evil plan? Or Ahab who knows it all and lets it happen, Ahab in whose name it all is carried out, Ahab who started it all off with his disgusting greed?

The whole event, the whole story has a lot to do with community.

There is great importance in the role the community played in committing the evil.

The story is clearly not only about Naboth and his vineyard.

With the murder of Naboth, the old laws instituted by God died.

With the death of Naboth, justice died.

With the death of Naboth, a new system ruled the society.

And that was the system of tyranny, exploitation, oppression and evil.

With the death of Naboth, the work of God's hand died.

With the death of Naboth, the community died.

That is why God sent his messenger Elijah to restore God's rule, to remind of God's law and to restore justice in the land.

The story is more than about Naboth's vineyard centuries ago. It is not done.

It is not over yet.

The tragic injustice did not stop with Naboth, his land or his town...

...it happened over and over again throughout the families and nations on this earth.

It happened then and it happens now.

It is happening today when helpless people stand up for what is right and pay with their lives. It happens to those who, realizing the unjust conditions in which they live, dare to say something. It happens to those who cannot stand under a corrupt system, who get comfortable with paying favours, or exploiting the weak.

The story of Naboth's vineyard is not a personal story, and it is not limited to one community. It is a global story.

And again: it is not over.

It is written over and over again...

And what are we doing?

What has our community to say to it?

Are we getting uncomfortable because we see injustice and don't speak? Or because we are getting rich and start to accumulate more than we need? Would we be those who commit the crime, or those who stand by and watch, or would we hide in our houses and pretend we didn't see...?

Are we Ahab? Or Jezebel?

Could we be Elijah?

How close are we to Naboth and his wife and children?

Which role would we play among the town's people?

Do we all somehow play our part in killing justice in the world? Killing maybe not in body, but in heart and soul, just in order to have a pleasant life ourselves? Killing not by shooting ballots, but killing with our silence?

These are hard and extremely uncomfortable questions. I am sorry to ask them, but what if I don't? What if we all never do?

And in the end, they all lead to one last question: would we as a church and as individuals be able to be a prophet as Elijah was to our community, to our nation, to our government and the governments of the world?

Would we as a church and as individuals be able to prevent more Naboths and their families from losing their existence and being wiped out? Because with them we ourselves are maybe not wiped out but damaged significantly in our human dignity and in our self-image as followers of Jesus who stands there with the Naboths and not with the Ahabs of this world?

Where do we stand?

And whose story do we tell?

Whose destiny will we remember?

And whose struggles can we remind the world of?

And last but not least: what would have happened to Naboth, had Mahatma Ghandi stood in his vineyard claiming it for Naboth and his family, had Rosa Parks sat on one of the chairs there and refused to get up, had all sorts of people taken Naboth's and his family's side and not left them alone?

Let me end with part of the quotation with which I began:

>> The forgotten narrative of Naboth's vineyard screams for justice. It shouts, "Enough! Something must be done." <<  
Amen.

