

FOLLOWING JEZEBEL'S SCRIPT

1 KINGS 21:1-21a

Jezebel has a plan. Ahab does not, and this is a problem. It is one of many problems in this story of political corruption and dysfunctional relationships. The first or “presenting” problem, as psychologists like to say, is that Naboth says “no.” Remember how the story goes? Ahab says to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard so that I may have it for a vegetable garden.” He offers a better vineyard or its value in money, but Naboth says “no,” because some things are invaluable, and for Naboth, ancestral inheritance is one of them.

Now that Ahab has a problem, Naboth does, too. Scripture says that Ahab goes home “resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him.” Some people, like Ahab, have difficulty taking “no” for an answer. What does he do when he comes home? Makes a spectacle of himself! In the language of 1 Kings, he lies down on his bed, turns away his face and does not eat. I don't know about you, but I expect such behavior from a child or even an adolescent but not from the ruler of Israel's northern kingdom.

It is not uncommon for drama to unfold in families according to a particular script. I am increasingly convinced that conflict and conflict resolutions are as much about performance as they are about differences of opinions. Now that I have stated this opinion, I feel confident in saying that I doubt that this is the first time that Ahab has come home, plopped on the bed and refused to eat, and I doubt that this is the first time that Jezebel rushed to his side, listened to him complain and offered him a pep talk. The question that she asks him at the end of his diatribe seems well-rehearsed to me: Do you not govern Israel?

Of course, he does. Not! God is the one and only sovereign. Good Jewish people know that, and good Christian people will, but at this point in the story, Ahab thinks he governs Israel, and Jezebel is

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sure that she does. Jezebel scripts the next series of events in the story. She writes letter in Ahab's name and seals them with his seal. She sends letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth asking them to "proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death." Even the most ardent proponents of the death penalty would object to this plan, but it is the plan that sets the stage for what comes next.

Ahab has a problem, and Jezebel has a plan. Jezebel's plan creates bigger problems for Ahab and even bigger ones for Naboth: "As soon as Jezebel hears that Naboth is stoned and was dead (notice that this is a two-step process, first stoning, then death), Jezebel says to Ahab, 'Go take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite,'" and Ahab sets out to take possession of the land. The question "What belongs to whom?" is asked implicitly in Scripture and answered explicitly by God, who says to Elijah, "Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria...You shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.'" This is not the God who will not forsake her nursing child or the God who runs to welcome the prodigal home. This is the God who judges Ahab as harshly as Ahab and Jezebel judge Naboth.

This part of the story ends with a couple of interesting twists. The first is that the story goes from God telling Elijah what to say to Ahab to Ahab saying to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" How does Ahab know that Elijah is looking for him? How does he know that Elijah is his enemy? Does he just assume that if he is in Jezreel to take Naboth's vineyard that anybody he bumps into is against him?

The second twist that I find interesting is what Elijah says to Ahab in response to the question, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" 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." In a sad, strange way, this story

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illustrates how violence begets violence and that the evil, anger and resentment that one sends out into the world eventually comes home and has adverse effects on the innocent and the guilty.

Every time that I preach from the Hebrew Scriptures, I think about how Jesus heard this story as a boy growing up in the synagogue. What did he learn from it? How did his interpretation of the story change over time? How did it prepare him to be crucified? How does it equip the church to fulfill the mission that God has given us to do in Christ's physical absence?

When Elijah and Ahab meet face-to-face in Naboth's vineyard, all I can think about is Jesus saying to the Pharisees, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength," and then he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Christ calls us to love God, neighbor and self and to love each one in a way that encourages us to love the others. Which do you find most difficult to love: God, neighbor or self? Do you blame God for heartaches that you have experienced or do you know God as the one who sustains you regardless of the circumstances in which you find yourself? Do you find it difficult to love another as yourself, because (a) you find it almost impossible to love yourself; or (b) you love yourself so much you would rather not share yourself with another?

When I think about Ahab coming home, lying down on his bed, turning away his face and not eating, my first thought is, "What a brat!" Looking more closely at the story, I do not find much awareness of God or self on the part of Ahab. Ahab relates to every human being in story from Naboth to Jezebel as something to be possessed. Naboth is reduced to a vineyard that he possesses, and Jezebel is there to help him get what he wants when he is incapable of getting it for himself. Then Elijah appears, and Ahab labels him the enemy. Perhaps this is because Elijah does not have anything that Ahab wants.

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What about Jezebel? What, or whom, does she love? She is attentive to Ahab, but why? Surely, this attention is required of the queen? She seems smarter and more mature than Ahab, at least in this part of the story. She is the one who names his behavior when she asks, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?” She is the one who tells Ahab to “get up, eat some food and be cheerful.” She is the one who reminds him that he is king of northern Israel, and she is the one who acts on his behalf if not Naboth’s or God’s.

Jezreel follows Jezebel’s script, and the performance is Jezebel’s home life writ large. At home, Ahab refuses to eat when he does not get his way. In public, Jezebel calls for fasting until justice, or in this case, injustice, is served. At home, Ahab is self-loathing to the point that he has to be reminded that he is king. In public, Naboth is stoned for cursing God and the king, and it is not clear to me that Ahab or Jezebel loves either one.

How the script by which we live our lives comes into being is so important. If we are simply working from the scripts of dysfunctional families that have been handed down from generation to generation, chances are, these scripts are not life-giving or God, neighbor or self-loving, and yet they may be strangely comforting, because they are familiar.

But please hear this: God has another plan, and it is one that celebrates love and light in relationships. It is one that helps us to look in the mirror and be honest with ourselves. It is one in which self-awareness flows from an awareness of the greatness and graciousness of God. God is a God of truth. God calls us to be neighborly. God calls us to live and love openly and honestly at church, at home and in the world.

Be careful not to lust after vegetables in other people’s gardens. Recognize that human beings are capable of bratty-ness. Know that there is a difference between a fit and a fast, and give thanks for the gift of self-awareness. Self-awareness that recognizes the limitations of self-help helps us to lift our

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eyes unto the hills from whence our help comes. Our help is in the name of the Lord, helper and defender of Israel, who rescues the peoples of the world from destructive anger and sets us free to love and serve each other in the peace of Christ our Lord. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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