

Third Sunday after Pentecost 6/13/2010 1 Kings 21:1-10-21a; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

You don't hear of many people naming their daughters Jezebel, do you? It's not surprising. Do you know what the name Jezebel means? When I checked some baby name websites, I found a variety of meanings – like *wicked*, *unexalted*, *condemned* - not something you want to burden a child with. One site was a bit more charitable; it said that “in Biblical Hebrew it means *there is no nobility*. Others give the meaning as *unmarried* or *chaste*, which doesn't seem to make sense until you dig around a little bit. It may be that the name Jezebel originally meant *the Lord exists* (referring to Ba'al, the god worshipped by the Phoenicians), which would make sense since the Jezebel of our story was a Phoenician princess before she became Ahab's queen in Israel. Originally her name might have been translated as *Virgin of Ba'al*, hence *unmarried* and *chaste*. But later, after Queen Jezebel rose to fame – or rather infamy – in the Bible, the name took on a negative meaning. Her name has become synonymous with *evil woman*. She is often called the *Whore of Ba'al*, not only for her supposed sexual immorality, but also her worship of foreign gods.

So it's no wonder we don't have a lot of little Jezebels running around. However, the biblical Jezebel does make for a good story. Whenever she appears we can be sure there's going to be treachery, skullduggery, and ultimately a bad, bad end. The unfortunate thing is that this character of Jezebel has become so sexualized - in the same way that the unnamed woman in the gospel was assumed to be a prostitute (surely if she was a sinner, her sins must have been of a sexual nature) - that we miss what was really going on in the story that runs throughout 1 Kings.

Jezebel's crimes were not about sex; they were about power. She was one half of the political power couple of Israel around the 9th century BCE. In the Old Testament, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel represent unbridled power. And this week's text is one more story about one of the prophets raised up in Israel by God to speak truth to power.

The story itself is perfectly straightforward. It's story of greed and of the misuse of power over the powerless. Ahab wants Nabob's vineyard. When he doesn't get his way, he becomes petulant, and Jezebel steps in and takes charge. She conspires to have Nabob killed. "Go, take possession of the vineyard," the scheming queen she says to her compliant husband, "You don't even have to pay for it now." End of story.

Except it's not. Without any transition the scene changes, and Elijah appears. Just as Ahab is getting ready to take possession of Naboth's land, Elijah, the prophet, the truth-teller confronts the king and queen with the word of God: “I will bring disaster down upon you.” We don't get the end of the story of Ahab and Jezebel yet, but we know that it's not going to be good. Nabob will be avenged because at the heart of this story is the most basic theme of prophetic literature: God's response to injustice.

And we do not have to see this as a case of divine punishment, as God returning evil for evil, but as the reality of cosmic and social justice. It may take time, but institutional injustice eventually has its cost for politicians, presidents, corporate executives, and rulers, or their future generations. We do reap what we no matter how powerful we may be. The story of

Nabob's vineyard may have taken place 3000 years ago, but the underlying issues remain the same.

As different a culture ours is from that of ancient Israel, we can relate to many of the things going on in the court of Ahab and Jezebel. The rich and powerful can still take away from the poor the little that they have. This happens here in our nation and communities, and on a larger scale, between the rich and poor nations of the world. And even though we as individuals may not feel very powerful, we do have power, and with it comes the responsibility to use it for good and not for our own selfish ends, individually or collectively. We can't claim innocence, when like Ahab we stand by and let others do things that benefit us; we are participating in the wrongdoing all the same. Justice calls us all to examine the relationship between our wealth and the poverty of others. This seems to be what the story of Ahab and Jezebel and Naboth and Elijah is teaching us – that our actions have consequences, and all of this matters to God.

Today perhaps the most damning consequence of our actions individually and collectively is the destruction of our environment. What would Elijah have to say about the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe and the BP oil spill now polluting the Gulf of Mexico. The Ahabs and Jezebels of today have made our world pretty bad. The scope of their crimes has increased by leaps and bounds from a vineyard to an entire ecosystem. Next week will be the two month anniversary of the beginning of the spill. I expect that we all are asking the same question that 11-year-old Malia Obama asked her daddy, "Did you plug that hole yet?"

In the face of the ongoing destruction we see on the news every night, it's hard to feel any hope at all about the future of the human race. While BP and the federal government plug away at trying to plug the oil leak, the rest of us feel utterly helpless. Yes, there is talk of punitive measures against BP, but I want to know what I can do in response to this sort of disaster? What can the church do? What should the response of people of faith be?

This is the hard part, because we have to admit to our complicity in the disaster. It's easy to just blame BP, the government, or even conservative ideology – and the voices of contemporary prophets are needed. But as Steve Thorngate points out in *Lamenting Our Oil Addiction*: "The relevant question is not whether you own a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* (which endorses the belief that the best system is one with no government controls or regulation); it's whether you own an automobile. Or fly in airplanes, buy things made of plastic and/or transported from far away, eat factory-farmed food or burn paraffin candles. While business and government must be held accountable for their reckless behavior, we're all complicit in our culture's addiction to oil." (Also Foxconn)

I don't know about you, but that leads me even further into despair. We are addicted to oil; what can we do? The most helpful thing that I have seen thus far comes from the Duke Divinity School, which has created *The BP Oil Spill: A Christian Call for Lament and Reconciliation*. They say: *A problem of this magnitude is never just about individual responsibility. But it's an inevitable part of the problem, and lament seems like just the right response.* So - they've created a sign-on petition, which reads in part:

As followers of Christ . . . we mourn the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe and the BP oil spill now polluting the Gulf of Mexico. We mourn the human and animal lives lost, the economies and ecosystems destroyed, and the gifts of God . . . squandered and poisoned. Most of all we mourn our complicity and active participation in an economy based on toxic energy that has made such death inevitable. We acknowledge that our current lifestyle . . . based on oil and oil-based products is at the root of the problem and that the irresponsibility and hubris of

companies such as BP are only outgrowths of this deeper reality. As the prophets of old said, we hear the land witnessing and testifying against us.

As a sign of this recognition of our sin we commit to:

- *Fasting from all food on Fridays except that which has been locally grown with methods that do not rely on petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides.*

- *Making every effort to take each Friday as a day when we do not drive but rather walk, bike, ride public transit, or carpool to school or work.*

- *Praying for the transformation of our lives as individuals and churches toward freedom from fossil fuels and reconciliation with all God's creation.*

- *Continuing these practices until the oil spill has been cleaned up and the work of restoration of God's creation in the Gulf has begun.*

On Sunday June 20, the two month anniversary of the beginning of the spill, we invite all Christians to lament the oil spill with a fast from oil. *On that day, we will celebrate the Sabbath as we mourn: abstaining from driving motor vehicles of any kind, avoiding food that was grown and shipped great distances, and reflecting on the aspects of our lives that are so entrenched in the oil economy that we cannot even quit them for one day. We commit to exploring other appropriate acts of lament in our own church communities . . . Now is the time for our turning.* <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/lamentbpoilspill/>

Even as I read this, I begin to make excuses why I can't comply, even for one day, let alone change my lifestyle. But it is what we are being called to do if there is to be any hope. We can't expect God to come down and just fix this mess. God works with the world as it is to draw it to what it can be. The good news is that, even when the world is bad, when we make bad choices, God never ceases to work, and those faithful to God never cease to respond to God's lure to goodness.

I found this comment most helpful to me as I have struggled with despair over the oil spill. It is from Gláucia Vasconcelos Wilkey (Assistant Professor, School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle University, Seattle, WA): "Look, Israel is called 'God's vineyard.' This story is not only about evil's power or Naboth's property. God's people are God's vineyard, and even when such vineyard has been stomped, burned, robbed, and the night of despair seems long and unending, grace conquers evil power, and joy comes in the morning. That is what this story is about."

Our vineyard has been stomped, burned, robbed, and the night of despair seems long and unending. But these ancient stories remind us that, no matter what is happening around us, and what realities we ourselves may be unwillingly caught up in, we keep on hoping, not based on events currently engulfing us, but on what we have experienced from God in the past. God's justice will prevail. Good will overcome evil, mercy will overcome pain, life will overcome death. Ahab and Jezebel do not have the final word.

Amen

