

“We Are Ahab!”

Sunday, June 13, 2010: I Kings 21:1-21a

The Rev. Peter Faass

The next time you hear someone say that the Bible is boring, tell them to go and read the two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings. There is more than enough murder, betrayal, palace intrigue, irrational behavior, back-room dirty deals, and love affairs in those scriptural pages to satisfy anyone’s need for some zesty reading!

Today’s passage from the first book of King’s is a vivid portrayal of just how zesty things can get.

There is this man named Naboth who lives in Jezreel. Now the valley in which the town of Jezreel sits is like our mid-western plains, the bread basket of Israel. Jezreel has incredibly fertile soil and a perfect climate for growing crops.

Naboth owned a lovely vineyard, probably cultivating some nice pinot noir grapes to turn into wine for his cellar. Only there was a problem with the vineyard - its location; it was next to the winter palace of King Ahab of Israel.

Now Ahab was what we would call a bad boy. Although Jewish, he married Jezebel, a pagan woman who converted Ahab to the worship of the pagan god Baal. This is the same Jezebel whose name has come to mean evil and scheming.

Ahab is a broody, sulky, immature guy who thinks he should get what he wants when he wants it. So when Ahab spots Naboth’s lovely vineyard he lusts after it. Ahab wants the property to plant a vegetable garden. It’s possible Ahab desires to be like Christ Church and establish a community garden to nurture good-will and sustainability. Bust based on his reputation; NOT! Most likely he wants the garden to grow produce to feed the royal household at his winter palace. Or maybe Jezebel has a yearning for fresh tomatoes? Who knows?

At first glance Ahab’s deal seems honest enough. He offers Naboth a choice of a better vineyard in another part of town, but Naboth declines it. Naboth is not being disrespectful. The vineyard is part of his ancestral inheritance and therefore sacred to him. Hebrew law prevented the sale of property to non-Jews. Since Ahab had abandoned the worship of Israel’s God to worship Baal, he was no longer a Jew in good standing. SO Naboth is horrified at the offer to sell part of his people’s patrimony to an apostate. In the Book of Leviticus, God tells the Hebrews, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” (Lev. 25:23).

In Hebrew theology the land was owned by God. God gave the land into the care of the Hebrew people with the proviso that they be good stewards of it. Naboth’s refusal to sell his vineyard to Ahab is his honoring a religious obligation. He is obeying the law.

Ahab sulks and behaves peevishly when Naboth says no. Yet he does not force the issue, for he knows that even the king is subject to the law. But Jezebel has no such qualms. She mocks her husband’s lack of backbone. “Do you not govern Israel,” she asks sarcastically. “I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

Jezebel proceeds to un-hatch a diabolical scheme to set up Naboth as a traitor and a blasphemer, both of which carry the death penalty. Jezebel’s back-handedness works and her wishes are carried out; Naboth is stoned to death.

She then goes into Ahab and says, “Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite which he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead.” And Ahab does that very thing.

In one fell swoop the principles that uphold society are usurped. Governmental offices have been corrupted by outside influences. Neighbor has turned against neighbor. Those entrusted with upholding the law and justice have perverted it. The law is manipulated to perpetrate a gross injustice against society and to feed the avarice of a few.

Sound familiar? This scripture is a vivid portrayal of abuse of power and the social injustice that results from greed and lust; from wanting to obtain something for one’s own personal desires while callously ignoring the ensuing harm to other people, as well as to one’s relationship with the creation and the Creator.

Since April 21st the world has watched in horror as the Gulf of Mexico becomes increasingly fouled by the oil gushing from

the devastating failure and collapse of British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil platform. Recent estimates are that 20,000 to 40,000 barrels per day are spewing into the Gulf's waters. Fish, birds and sea life are dying in untold numbers. Fragile eco systems are being infiltrated by oil and at risk of destruction. Beaches are fouled. Water is poisoned. The tourist and fishing industries, upon which hundred of thousands of people from Florida to Mexico rely on for their livelihoods, are either dead or at risk of death.

There has been no shortage of finger-pointing for this tragedy.

It is clear that mismanagement and co-opting of governmental agencies by big oil companies had much to do with the lax enforcement of preventative measures that would have averted this disaster. Other than the Coast Guard there has been a dearth of effective, strong leadership from either the Federal government or BP in the midst of the crisis. Haven't we learned anything in the aftermath of 9/11 and Katrina?

Like the saga of Naboth and Ahab, the oil spill is a portrayal of the abuse of power and the social injustice that results from greed and lust; from wanting to obtain something for one's own personal desires and callously ignoring the resulting harm to other people, as well as to one's relationship with the creation and the Creator.

What this oil spill reminds us of is this: we humans have lost sight of a critical reality. The earth and all creation are still God's not ours; that is as true today as in the days of Naboth and Ahab. Like the Hebrew's we are aliens and tenants on the earth, we do not own it and therefore it is not ours to sell, certainly not into wanton degradation. We are entrusted with the good stewardship of this earth, not with it's destruction for our own personal wants and cravings.

It would be easy to lay all this avarice and degradation at BP and big oils feet. Easier still to say that conniving, scheming, under-handed abuse of power is practiced only by the Federal government, lobbyists, big oil and profit crazed Wall St.

Yet for any of us to engage in the blame game is to miss a critical truth. It is you and I – the American public - who are the real culprits in this story. We are Ahab! It is our lust for oil that feeds the avarice of big oil companies and Wall St., resulting in the collusion of the government with big business, which then sets the stage for tragedies like the BP oil spill. It is our lust for oil and oil based products – especially gasoline – that is the genesis of this tragedy.

Each time we drive our cars to do some meaningless task, or drive a block or two instead of walking, whenever we gun the accelerator to go from red light to red light, of drink bottled water products, or wantonly consume a slew of other petrochemical based products, we fuel the problem of high-risk oil drilling and the degradation of the creation.

Had we heeded the warnings we received forty years ago during the Arab oil embargo and then begun to seriously take the issue of our addiction and reliance on oil, we would not find ourselves looking on helplessly at dead fish, dying pelicans, devastated economies and destroyed wet-lands today.

Look closely; our hands are as oil covered as the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Like Jezebel's blood covered hands, our oil covered hands convict us of our culpability in this story.

Ahab is eventually called on the carpet for his misdeeds by God's prophet Elijah, who tells the king, "Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster upon you." We too have done what is evil in the sight of God. We are guilty – all of us from BP, big oil, lobbyists, Wall St. and the Federal government, right down to each one of us; we are all culpable of bringing down this disaster upon ourselves.

Christians believe that God's desire is always to be merciful, that God always desires to re-new a right relationship with us when we screw up. God can heal this damaged earth, but only in tandem with us as co-creators, not destroyers. We need to amend our ways – and don't kid yourself, each thing we do to reduce our dependence on petrochemicals, no matter how small, counts. Ultimately scripture informs us that we must return to our role as good stewards of this earth that has been given into our care. Will we do that? Our lives and our futures depend on our saying yes.

Amen.