

This month all of our Old Testament readings come from First and Second Kings, vignettes from the ministries of two prophets: Elijah the Tishbite and his successor, Elisha. Last weekend, we heard about Elijah and the widow of Sidon: the prophet shows up at this poor woman's house in the midst of a severe famine. She has nothing left in the cupboard except a little flour and oil. The situation is desperate; in fact, the narrator tells us it is so desperate that she is preparing to die. And yet when Elijah knocks on her door and asks her to share the little bit that she has, she sets another place at her meager table and basically says, "my house is your house." Miraculously (as so often happens when we choose generosity over fear) it turns out that there really is *enough*.

Today we have an opportunity to explore a much darker side of the human psyche: in the story of Naboth's vineyard we encounter the antithesis of neighborly love: envy and greed. These emotions are sadly just as real a part of our experience and perhaps more familiar. If it is true that the poor who have next to nothing often have the most to teach us about generosity, then it is also true that sometimes those who seem to have *everything* still feel like it is not enough. In the twenty-first chapter of First Kings, Ahab and Jezebel take what doesn't belong to them, without regard for human life. It's an all too familiar story of how easily the powerless are abused by the powerful.

When you combine the human propensity to want what does not belong to us with the power to do whatever you want and get away with it, innocent people will always suffer. Most of us gathered here today are not thieves. But I suspect that all of us have some experience with the corrosive sin of envy. Like Ahab, we may even have pouted or stewed once or twice over wanting something that we can not have. But usually we are able to stop short of just taking it, if for no other reason than that we don't want to risk jail time.

So that's where the story of Naboth's vineyard begins: with the corrosive power of envy. Naboth has a vineyard that Ahab wants. He has plenty of wine, but he hopes to convert Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden and grow heirloom tomatoes and organic cucumbers. The problem is that Naboth is not at all interested in selling: it's the land he grew up on, the land his parents and grandparents sweated on. It's not about the money for him. It's about being connected to that hallowed ground that his parents and grandparents farmed. Unfortunately, however, his refusal of the king's offer (which we are told was a reasonable one) will cost him his life.

Our narrator puts the blame squarely on Jezebel's shoulders, suggesting that she practically taunts her husband: "so who's the king here anyway?" She takes care of things, and before you can snap your fingers Naboth has been set up, convicted, and murdered. It isn't clear whether Ahab knows of this plan and goes along with it or if he has chosen to have plausible deniability or if in fact he knows Jezebel all too well and she is doing his dirty work. It doesn't matter really; in the end dead is dead and Naboth is dead. Regardless of where blame is laid, the issue here is about power—it's about the king and queen's belief that they are above the law. Ahab has his heirloom tomatoes.

It is into this breach that the prophets speak on behalf of God and those who have been silenced or disappeared. Some of us have been taught to think of the prophets as fortune tellers, as people who made predictions about a future messiah. But the core vocation of a prophet is to speak the truth to power. And that is exactly what Elijah does here. He tells Ahab and Jezebel that there are consequences for their actions; that what they have done is reprehensible. Elijah has the *chutzpah* to say these things, even at great risk to his own life. But it should come as no surprise that the

powerful don't tend to enjoy having truth spoken to them, especially when it doesn't jive with the narrative they have been feeding the media and perhaps even themselves. And so this will get Elijah in some trouble, as it always gets prophets in trouble. But all that in due time...more to come next weekend.

In the meantime, I want to invite you to step back with me and reflect a little bit more deeply on Jezebel, the queen. Ahab is portrayed as the worst king in all of the Bible. Yet his foreign wife, Jezebel, is seen as the root cause of all of his failings. If it's true that behind every good man is a strong woman, well, then beyond every Ferdinand Marcos is an Imelda who is enamored with shoes. In this case, Imelda's name is Jezebel. Elijah the Tishbite and Jezebel, this foreign queen, are presented as polar opposites. Biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible, calls them "the odd couple."^{*} Elijah is an Israelite who worships no god but Yahweh alone; Jezebel is a foreigner who worships Baal, the God of the Caananites. He is male, she is female. She is from the coast; he is from the desert. They are locked in battle. Yet, as is so often the case, underneath all their differences they may have more in common with each other than either would ever care to admit. A lot of people wind up dead because of their face-off. As people who sometimes tell me they aren't fans of the Old Testament will quickly notice, it's not fair to say all of the blood is on the hands of Jezebel and her gods either. In the battle between Jezebel and Elijah, innocent people die and there is blood on everyone's hands.

When we encounter polarities like this, whether in the Bible or in our daily lives, it helps sometimes to step back and do some self-examination. Many of you know the story of the Wizard of Oz and so you know about good witches like Glinda and bad witches like the wicked witch of the west. Some of you may also know the Broadway musical, *Wicked*—based on the book by the same name. Besides the terrific music, what makes that play so interesting is that it tells the same story from another angle. It challenges us to consider perspective when we start attaching moral labels like "wicked" or "good" to people. The truth is that it depends on where you stand, not only because stories are like that but because *life* is. If you don't believe me, then try being friends to both parties when they are going through a messy divorce. Something terrible will happen and usually it will involve the kids. If you have coffee with one parent on Tuesday and the other on Wednesday, I can guarantee you that you will hear two totally different stories that will bear little resemblance to each other; and it will be nearly impossible to figure out what *really* happened.

Now some people may already be getting nervous about where I am about to go with all of this when it comes to applying this insight to Biblical stories. We get it that two people going through a divorce tend to demonize each other, or that a play about good witches and bad witches invites revisionist readings. But some of us may worry more about taking these insights to the Bible. And yet, that is what *midrash* is all about. Anyone who has ever read *The Red Tent* knows how this works: stories generate stories. Good questions generate better questions, rather than facile answers and a really good narrative (fictional *or* historical) is meant to stir our imaginations, not settle doctrinal questions. So it is that when the Israelites were dancing and shaking their tambourines and singing after crossing the Red Sea—after Yahweh had hurled horse and rider into the sea and it was a great victory party—some of the rabbis insisted on telling another story about how surely on that

* I am indebted in this sermon to Trible for her essay, "The Odd Couple: Elijah and Jezebel," from *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (Ed. Christina Bachmann and Celina Spiegel.)

day God was weeping because even if they had it coming to them, the Egyptians were God's children, too.

It is in that *midrashic spirit* that I invite you to wonder with me about the story that Jezebel might have told back at home about that crazy wild prophet who was her nemesis, that prophet who smelled like a camel and lived in caves. Try to imagine how hard it must have been for her to be faithful to the Canaanite traditions of her parents and grandparents among hardcore fundamentalist Yahwists. A truly "fair and balanced" news source might point out that Jezebel arrived in Israel by way of an arranged marriage that she had no say in; which is to say that she was more the *result*, not the *cause*, of Ahab's foreign policy decisions. Imagine how frustrating it must have been to wake up every single morning and watch the news and find that they are all following the same narrative: that she is the power-hungry wicked witch behind her husband's policy decisions.

A Biblical scholar who dares to think such radical thoughts might go on to note that the narrator responsible for giving us First and Second Kings is known as the "Deuteronomist," and like all narrators (including Biblical ones) the Deuteronomist had a particular perspective and even agenda. The Deuteronomists are the same people who brought us Ezra and Nehemiah, and they had a big problem with interfaith marriage. (To be more specific, they had a problem with Israelite men who took foreign wives.) So it makes one wonder: what if the narrator is exaggerating and even scapegoating Jezebel as "evidence" of what happens when Israelites choose to enter into interfaith marriages? By the way, for a counter-testimony to the whole Deuteronomist take on this question within the Bible itself, see the Book of Ruth—where a foreign wife turns out to be not only a rather remarkable human being but David's great-grandma! The point is that the Bible sometimes argues with itself.

My point is not to offer a defense of the historical Jezebel, who for all I know may well have been just as awful a person as she is presented as being. But I raise these issues because it seems to me that reflecting on such questions helps me (and maybe some of you) to come to the Bible with a greater sense of wonder and curiosity—as less passive and more engaged with the stories. What you see isn't always what you get with people and surely if that is true in our own neighborhoods it must also be true of the people in the Bible, who were flesh and blood before they were words on a page. Underneath the stories there are always countless untold stories, and while we can't go back and interview the historical Jezebel *or* the historical Elijah, we can engage the story in the same creative ways that we might come out of a Broadway production of *Wicked*. In fact I think that's exactly what we are supposed to do if we mean to be stretched and grow spiritually.

For the Deuteronomist, there could be no compromise or even dialogue with *anyone* outside of the faith: if Israelites are good, then Canaanites like Jezebel must be wicked. But here's the thing: we are all a mixed bag. And the world that we live in, I think, requires a more subtle approach to interfaith conversations and a willingness to move beyond demonizing those with whom we disagree, not just for the sake of compromise or being "p.c." but in the genuine pursuit of truth.