

“The Consequences of Corruption”

June 13, 2010

1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a

Our lives are enhanced by good stories. Just ask any of those who turn to intriguing novels as one of the relaxing enjoyments of their existence. I am completing a current compelling volume that encompasses the consequences of corruption in a criminal justice system. Just ask the sports fans of this city who are celebrating a long awaited hockey championship. It has been a dramatic story to take in.

Fortunately, for those of us here on Sunday mornings, the scriptures contain numbers of good stories as well. In the wisdom of those who propose the passages for each week, we are given some of the most entertaining accounts in the summer months. Stories we can savor together, as well as on our own. Stories that still speak to our lives, and the life we share together in church and society. Our second scripture lesson from the 1st book of Kings is one of those stories.

The opening scene of this morning’s narrative is an encounter between King Ahab, portrayed as the most evil of the kings thus far, and his neighbor Naboth, a faithful, upstanding citizen of Jezreel. Naboth, it seems, has an attractive piece of property, enhanced by its location. Naboth’s vineyard is immediately adjacent to the king’s second house, his vacation home, if you will, in Jezreel. And the king covets this piece of land. How convenient it would be to walk out his back door and spend his leisure in his own nearby vegetable garden!

At first, the king might be heard as making a reasonable offer. He’ll trade Naboth for a better vineyard. Or he will buy it from him for a good price.

Once we are aware of the well-established legal and religious customs of that time and place, it’s another matter altogether. Ancestral property was to be held by families in perpetuity. The view point of our Jewish forbearers was that the land was a gift of God. To be used and to be cared for with no compromise. In fact, in years of jubilee, land lost due to debts or other reasons was to be restored. A sign of setting things right with neighbors and with God.

Thus we can hear Naboth’s abrupt refusal to consider the king’s offer as righteous indignation. Ahab was proposing that Naboth violate his responsibilities as a steward of the land, entrusted to him by God. As well as challenging his means of making a living on that time-proven site.

In the second scene, we look in on a pouting Ahab and his devious wife Jezebel. Ahab is, we are told, resentful and sullen. He has not gotten his way. And it’s made more painful by his realization that Naboth is right. Ahab recognizes the legal and religious customs of his citizens.

Good story telling is often marked by hyperbole; exaggerations of behaviors that help express the narrative. Here we have the mighty king lying on his bed with his face to

the wall. Refusing to eat. Rehearsing the painful conversation he had with Naboth out loud with his wife.

Who seems in no way sympathetic. Instead, she challenges him. She sarcastically reminds him, with a rhetorical question, that he does govern Israel, doesn't he? And since he appears unwilling to act, Jezebel promise to fix things for him.

All it took was the abuse of power. All that was needed was some corruption and complicity. Queen Jezebel steps in for the depressed King Ahab. Using his royal authority, his seal and giving dire directions. The leaders of the city of Jezreel are to arrange a fast, give Naboth the seat of honor and then arrange (read bribe) two scoundrels to accuse him falsely. What's more, they are to allege capital crimes curses against God and the king. Which called for his death by stoning. Quite some corrupt conspiracy!

Without detailing all the wrongs here, we should at least note the violations of 2 of the 10 commandments. Ahab was coveting his neighbor's property. And Jezebel called for the false witness of 2 scoundrels. In the royal abuse of power.

What's more, the entire story is an affront to the God we know and love. The consistent message of the prophets is that God is outraged by the exploitation of the powerless. Here Naboth, while a leading citizen, is powerless to protect himself from false allegations that lead to his execution.

In the verses we skipped over, Jezebel's instructions are carried out to the letter. Naboth is killed. And his family, apparently, forfeits their right to the land. The plot, shall we say, sickens.

Which leads to the closing scene. Jezebel assures Ahab that everything is taken care of and he didn't even have to sully himself with the details. He is simply to go and claim his future vegetable garden.

What Ahab was not counting on was an encounter with his long-time opponent, the prophet Elijah. It seems God has had enough of this outrageous corruption of justice. Elijah is to promise that corruption has its consequences. God will have the last word.

Quite a story for church on a Sunday morning! What are to make of this narrative? It has symbolic meaning which we may not recognize at first. Professor Gloria Vasconcelos Wilkey reminds us that one of the names for the people of Israel was "God's vineyard." The vineyard, the people, are to be protected. In all our dealings, economic and otherwise, we are to remember the justice and the goodness of God.

The echoes of this ancient narrative fill our ears in the news of our own time. The trial has begun of our former governor, charged with abusing his power in search of financial gain. The allegations include putting a senate seat up for sale. The consequences of this alleged corruption are in the hands of witnesses and counsel, judge and jury. We can give thanks that our government system of checks and balances provides for a full airing of the circumstances, and for accountability, if wrongdoing is persuasively proven.

At the same time, we have a second trial of a different sort of corruption. The alleged abused of police power by Commander Jon Burge and the officers working with him. Circumstances are here being reviewed that supposedly led to coerced confessions and individuals spending years in jail. Was the legal process, at the time, poisoned by the brutal abuse of police power? Hopefully the trial will help determine the consequences, if this corruption did occur.

The individuals testifying in this trial have at least been given a new lease on life, release from jail, though they bear the painful burdens of time lost and physical and emotional abuse suffered. What if, like Naboth, they had been convicted of capital crimes? They might have been executed! Does not this scriptural story lead us to challenge the use of the death penalty?

Our Presbyterian church has added its voice, over the years, to those opposing the death penalty. The ancient claims of a life for a life do not justify our current practice. The gift of life is God's. It is not in our hands to take this gift away. Especially because the human means of accountability are so fallible. Think of Naboth, a fine faithful citizen, falsely accused. The circumstances of his execution left no time for questioning the scoundrels on the specifics of their charges.

Now, it is tempting to distance ourselves from the real culprits, the Jezebels of the world, the actual perpetrators of evil, abuse, corruption and conspiracy. Yet remember our story. Ahab was fully complicit in Naboth's death and the unjust appropriation of Naboth's vineyard. Though we don't have royal power, we too may be passively complicit in the evils that surround us. What are our responsibilities?

We need to join our voices, individually and as a congregation with those who seek to challenge the dealings of our day. Not only apparent corruption and abuse, but issues of economic injustice as well. Issues that leave those without power on the margins. That is one reason our session, our governing board, has chosen to join other churches, agencies and organizations in the Lakeview Action Coalition. Together, we can make our opinions heard. We can seek the social justice that we believe God intends. We can refuse to remain silent, complicit in unjust arrangements of our time and place.

Let's allow the echoes of this ancient story to reverberate in our lives and our shared experiences. Let's not permit the past to be forgotten. May we enable God's continuing outrage with injustice to speak to our lives and empower our response. May we find creative ways to give expression to the compassion and justice the Holy One intends. Amen.