

1 Kings 21:17-29 (NRSV)

¹⁷Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” 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.”

²⁰Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, ²¹I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; ²²and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. ²³Also concerning Jezebel the LORD said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.’ ²⁴Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.”

²⁵(Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel. ²⁶He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the Israelites.)

²⁷When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. ²⁸Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹“Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.”

How far would you go to get what you want? Today’s story is a stark reminder why coveting what belongs to another makes the list of the Ten Commandments.

Ahab was in a foul mood. Sullen and withdrawn he had lain all day on a couch facing the wall. The palace servants cowered in the hallways of the grand winter home in Jezreel, afraid even to check on the king. As always, he was weak, unable to take any real action; but he was still king with the power over life and death. The servants had good reason to stay out of sight.

When Jezebel swept into the room, dressed to the nines, she quickly saw that something was wrong. What had her poor-excuse-for-a-king husband gotten himself into this time, she wondered? She asked him. She asked a second time. And a third.

Finally, he rolled over and told her the story. He had gone to visit a neighbor who owned a vineyard that bordered the king’s property. All Ahab had wanted was for the man, Naboth, to sell him the vineyard so Ahab could grow some vegetables in the plot. If Naboth didn’t want cash, Ahab had said he’d swap some land with Naboth. The man wasn’t going to lose even a penny and, yet, he had refused the king’s offers. Flat out said no.

Now Ahab knew quite well that Naboth’s refusal was within the law, and was not all that surprising. The Law of Moses had many provisions in it to ensure that land stayed within the family. It was a means of making sure the original division of land among the twelve tribes stayed reasonably intact. No Israelite would be surprised by Naboth’s refusal to let this piece of land leave his family.

Ahab also knew that he had been at least a bit insulting to Naboth. Trade Naboth's vineyard so Ahab can grow a vegetable garden? A vineyard, a longtime symbol of God's people, given up so the idolatrous king could grow some lettuce? Really? Even as Ahab told the story to Jezebel, who was as fearsome as ever, he realized that the insult wasn't all that subtle. Perhaps if he had lied to Naboth about his intentions for the land, he might have gotten a yes. But Ahab doubted it. Naboth was a stubborn fool. Who refuses a king?!

Who is a *true* prophet?

A prophet is someone who speaks for God. It seems that there was no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings, or at least those who claimed to speak for God. For example, 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. Regrettably, the entire bunch told the king what he wanted to hear – that he would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail . . . and he did. One mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

In his notes on Kings in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) Is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don't want to hear?, (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what actually happens?, and (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or away from worship of the one true God? Finally, "the most trustworthy prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance" (p. 523).

Jezebel began to simmer as Ahab told the story. What kind of man had she married? She was the daughter of Tyre's king, a strong and resolute ruler, who exercised kingly prerogatives without restraint.

These YHWH worshippers had such strange notions. They refused to eat pork and shrimp, both of which she adored, as evidenced by her ample hips. The Israelites even thought that the king himself was subject to the Law of Moses, the Law of this god-king they called YHWH. What a joke! There was no higher authority than the king. Refuse the king's request and off with your head. That was Jezebel's theory of governing.

Knowing her husband's fecklessness, Jezebel sighed and told Ahab that she would take care of it. He'd get that land. She would come up with a plan that, on the surface at least, stayed within the bounds of this perverse Israelite Law.

She patted him on the head, reassured him that everything would be alright, and hurried out of the room.

Jezebel headed back to her private chambers and summoned a messenger. She sat down and wrote out a few letters in Ahab's name, sealing them with his royal seal. This was no time for being timid.

She sent the letters to some well-connected men who she knew had their own

problems with Naboth. She was confident that each of them would participate fully and happily in her conspiracy.

Each letter was the same:

I need your help with a problem. I want to throw a banquet honoring Naboth. I need you and the others who are copied on this letter to find a couple of scoundrels and seat them opposite Naboth. At the opportune moment, they are to rise and denounce him as having cursed both God and the king. I hate to use two scoundrels, but you'll remember that under the Law, there must be more than one witness if the charge is to stick. With any luck, those at the

banquet will be so angry at Naboth they will take him outside and stone him on the spot, the lawful penalty for such a crime.

Your good friend and King,

Ahab

If the conspirators learned that she, not Ahab, was behind the plot, so much the better. They'd be a lot less likely to betray her than her husband. She was Jezebel after all.

Naboth's mind raced as the crowd dragged him out to the streets. One moment he was being honored at a banquet given in his name. The next moment two men were standing and shouting slanderous charges against him. He hadn't even been able to understand them. But the crowd at the banquet had.

He felt the first stone slam into his back. A sharp pain pierced him. Then a second punched him in the arm. He struggled to shield himself, curling into a ball. But the stones, sharp and heavy, began arriving in rapid succession. The dirt of the street clogged his nose and fouled his mouth. His brain was no longer working right; he gave up trying to understand what was happening. There was soon nothing but the pain. And then . . . not even that.

Having gotten word that the deed was done, Jezebel walked down the hall to Ahab. As cold as her heart had grown in recent years, she shuddered at the thought of being stoned to death. But Naboth had brought this on himself. Refuse a king and pay with your life. That would be her motto until the day she died.

Ahab should have been happier than he was. Jezebel had gotten him Naboth's vineyard, at no cost. He knew the story of Naboth's stoning and was pretty sure it was one of his wife's put-up jobs. She was one shrewd, cold woman. At these moments, he was always grateful that she was on his team. He hoped it stayed that way. She scared him.

But not as much as that strange self-proclaimed prophet, Elijah. Now that's one scary dude! Ahab had been relieved when Elijah ran off and hoped he would never come back. In fact, maybe Jezebel would help him figure out how to make sure Elijah never showed up again . . . *what's all that ruckus out in the courtyard? . . . who's shouting for me now?*

As Elijah left Ahab's palace in Jezreel he shook his head. He hoped that this had been his last mission for YHWH. Elijah didn't know how he could possibly get through another confrontation. Though . . . this one had been a bit different.

Being a prophet and all that, Elijah hadn't held back when he faced Ahab in the courtyard. God knew the crime that had been committed and the punishment for it would be as awful as the stoning had been.

The dogs that had licked up Naboth's blood would lick up the blood of Ahab. That was bad enough, Elijah thought, but you should have seen the look on Ahab's face when he announced God's promise that dogs would eat the dead body of Jezebel. Elijah couldn't help feeling a little satisfied that Jezebel had overhead him, as she stood scowling in the

doorway. To cap it off, Elijah had pronounced God's word that ruin would fall on Ahab's family.

But then the most remarkable thing had happened. Ahab seemed to have a moment of actual repentance. He had torn his clothes, demanded that sackcloth be brought to him to wear, and had proceeded to fast.

It all seemed way too convenient and much too late. It was surely too late for Naboth. But then Elijah had gotten that moment of unmistakable clarity again. YHWH was going to extend some measure of grace and mercy on Ahab. Because Ahab had finally humbled himself before God, the punishment would not be meted out on Ahab, at least not completely, but on his sons.

Elijah didn't think Ahab deserved mercy in any form and was even relieved that God had said nothing about mercy for Jezebel. This whole sad affair was a testament to the dangers of covetousness. It was on the "Top Ten" list for good reason.

Mercy for Ahab? . . . Elijah had given up trying to figure out this God.

Elijah the Mentor

As you'll recall from last week, after being threatened by Jezebel, Elijah ran southward, ending up in the wilderness of Sinai. There he gave up, ready to die. But he was restored by God and given a new mission. As Elijah returned northward, he arrived at a field being plowed (1 Kings 19:19-21):

¹⁹So he [Elijah] set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" ²¹He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

So Elisha became Elijah's servant. I think today we'd call it a mentoring relationship. Elisha too had been called by God. Elisha left everything to follow after Elijah. He even slaughtered his ox and sold all his farm equipment. There was no going back. Elisha committed himself 100%.

Later, with Elisha standing near him, Elijah will be taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot riding upon a whirlwind, leaving behind his mantle, the symbol of his prophetic ministry for Elijah. The protégé will carry on the work of his mentor.

On a personal level, Elisha's ministry, like Elijah's, will be a ministry of life. He will restore to life a young boy who had died. He will save many lives by purifying a pot of poisonous stew. He will feed a hundred men with a few scraps. But Elisha will also follow in the political footsteps of his mentor, confronting the kings who turn away from the Lord. He will even play a key part in several Israelite victories. Elisha will never shirk away from the responsibilities given him by God and passed on to him by Elijah.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Coveting what another person has can seem like such a small deal sometimes. But this story begins with just such a sin. It leads to another and then another. The consequences of sin are like the ever-spreading ripples in a pond. What has been your own experience with covetousness? Have you seen first-hand real damage done to or by a person because of covetousness? Do you think we have a problem seeing this sin at all, especially in ourselves? How can we become more sensitive to it? How can we strive to overcome it?
2. Why do you think God shows even a small measure of mercy to Ahab? What does it reveal to us about God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Kings 22:1-28 We return to the military campaign that began in chapter 20. Ahab is the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat is the king of Judah. One prophet tells King J. the truth about the pending battle.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Kings 22:29-53 Ahab is killed in battle and dogs lick up his blood. His son, Ahaziah, takes the throne and is as bad a king as his father.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Kings 9:1-27 Jehu revolts against the reign of Ahab's son, Ahaziah, who is killed in battle.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Kings 9:30-37 Jehu has Jezebel tossed out a window. Her body is eaten by dogs.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Kings 10:1-36 Jehu goes on to wipe out the rest of Ahab's dynasty, in keeping with the prophecy of Elijah.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

