

**“Choosing Justice”**  
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**1 Kings 21**  
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I sum up today’s story: Ahab, seventh King of Israel, approaches his neighbor and makes a generous, open-ended offer on his vineyard: I offer another vineyard to you in exchange, or generous payment, what do you choose? He says. I’d like to put in a lovely garden, a kitchen garden. But Naboth, the vineyard owner, is a devout man and knows that by the teachings of his Jewish tradition, he is only the steward of this land gifted by God to his safekeeping, and thus he has no right to sell what was never his in the first place. King Ahab, expressing questionable emotional maturity, goes home to his bed to nurse his pride and pout, taking one man’s noble statement as a threat to his unchecked power and greed.

And his pride is further threatened by Queen Jezebel, who cares none for the culture and values of the Hebrew people and understands the vineyard owner’s rejection as pure affront: how dare he speak to you that way? He has no right to refuse you! And what kind of man are you to lie down and take this insult? By the rules of Phoenicia, from where the Queen comes, no one has the right to say no to a king. The king becomes more reprehensible in our eyes as he passively employs the Queen to take up the pen for him, inviting a terrible scheme that ultimately results in the vineyard owner’s death and the theft of his land. While the Queen pleads ignorance of the Jewish value of stewardship, she readily uses to her own advantage the law of Leviticus and has some scoundrels accuse the man of cursing King and God, which, according to Leviticus, results in the punishment of death by stoning.

Sickeningly, the accusation and conviction of an innocent man are cloaked in an event of religious piety: the community fasts and prays together, devout and pious: the timing of the false accusations ensure the swift punishment.

Now the land is the King’s, and he wastes no time planting his vegetable garden on this now cursed soil. When the voice of Conscience, the voice of Freedom, the voice of Justice appears in the person of Elijah the prophet, the King says, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” And God’s voice in response is angry, very angry. “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you.”

What a story. When confronted with a story of such violence and wrong action, my heart immediately goes to “if only.” If only someone, even one voice in the story had been enemy to the evil that was multiplied in each action, in each inaction, in each silence and each word. If only Elijah had shown up earlier, a life might have been saved. If only disquiet or a splinter of courage formed in the heart of someone. If only Naboth, the faithful steward of the vineyard, had had a better offer that day and had declined the invitation to sit at the table of betrayal ultimately stole his life and The Steward’s land. If only Jezebel hadn’t used her cleverness for self-serving, violent purposes. If only Ahab had remembered the faith of his ancestors and the voices of prophets before . . .

If only that this story were simply a story and not a reality played out over and over and over again in the world around us, of power used not to uplift but to oppress and do violence.

Is it any wonder than when God’s voice speaks as our story ends, it is a voice of anger and consequence? If we glean nothing else from this account, may it serve to remind us that our actions, whether for good or evil, have consequences which multiply. The algorithm of justice: my action plus your reaction equals something unleashed on the world. In this case, what is unleashed is injustice resulting in the death of an innocent and thievery from God. And let us not be mistaken: God is not ambivalent. God cares deeply. God takes sides. Our God is a God of justice.

Many of us retreat from the notion of an angry God, for all the right reasons. An angry God, given voice by the powerful for reasons impure, has perpetrated and justified deaths of innocents, the alienation of many, been used to justify all kinds of hateful action, and has silenced the outsider and stranded the misunderstood.

For many of us here, along the way we have struggled in our Christian faith with characterizations of God as angry and vengeful, a power to be feared and our behavior to be shaped by that fearsomeness. Many of us have experienced God portrayed as a Divine Bully, who uses fear to make us think right thoughts and have worked hard to come fully into the presence of God by reckoning with such imagery.

I remember as a teenager attending a play at my home church that was many vignettes of young people who had made poor choices: drugs, unintended pregnancy, and gang activity. And each scene ended in death resulting from their actions. Each of these tragic scenes resulted in the deceased being thrown into a fiery pit of eternal damnation, which in this play was a big wooden box illuminated by red lights. It certainly made an impression on me, a visual image of what I was being taught in that church community about God's separating the wheat from the chaff, about the consequences of their understanding of disbelief. I walked out of that church that evening and never returned; strangely grateful to walk away from a God I couldn't recognize, free to seek images of God that matched my experience of God

Along the way, I have learned that dread of God's wrath is not the most positive or healthy way to develop a relationship with God, or with anyone for that matter. That spiritual devotion is a joyful response to a gracious, merciful love.

But I wonder: is there room in the wideness of God's one love for God's wrath? That a focus on God's mercy to the total exclusion of God's wrath has its own pitfalls and perils? What are the costs to justice if we sanitize, neutralize, relativize the passion of God for what is righteous and just?

I am glad to receive a daily devotional from the United Church of Christ every morning on my email. In the midst of the dizzying amount of information directed at me, there is a simple, frequently profound thought that gives me pause and helps me to re-orient the rest of what comes to me. On June 9, I opened my email to hear these words from writer Kenneth Samuel:

“If nothing we ever do angers God, then everything we do is acceptable to God. This is not what the writer of Job believed about God. Job believed in a God who is angry about the inhumane actions of humanity. Job believed in a God who judged and punished people for their lack of compassion and care for their neighbors. In fact, Job would rather wish punishment upon himself than face the wrath of God that is brought about by human selfishness. Look again at his lament: ‘If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary... If I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it . . . If I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment . . . then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.’”

Something stirred in me when I read on for Kenneth Samuel goes on to say this: “I never would have imagined that my youthful dread of hell would be redeemed by God and used to strengthen my commitment to help make life better for the poor, the marginalized and the disenfranchised, who

face a living hell every day of their lives.”

Today’s story makes me painfully aware of how angry love can be when faced with the willful perpetuation of evil. It is a dimension of love that complicates: how deeply does God care about injustice? How deeply then should we care? If we were to read a bit further than we do today, Ahab is filled with remorse at his behavior and his repentance receives a response from God, a delay, rather than a reprieve, from consequences. But I want us to stay with God’s anger, to not read further in the story, as difficult as that task may be.

When might righteous anger in the face of injustice move us to right action, to speaking truth to decisions that violate the law of love? When might we use our voice for justice even at great sacrifice to self? What does God require of us in the face of injustice?

Perhaps anger, even God’s, can be redeemed and inspire.

Walter Brueggemann, scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, has written eloquently on I Kings 21, and on the larger question of stories that are told generation after generation, not just to warn us but to offer us *choices*. He believes that stories like Naboth’s provide "materials for the demanding work of faith in a society that is now largely defined by the global economy with its mesmerizing technologies and its disorienting pluralism. In that context, there is a great temptation to imagine that deep choices are no longer available and that the present global system, power, and money have closed off all alternatives. In that environment, the practice of faith entails courageous imagination, grounded by trusted texts that may yield otherwise."

In other words, this story matters deeply in shaping our moral action in this moment. There is a temptation to believe that deep choices are no longer available in this world we live in, isn’t there? That our place in the wider world of just and unjust action is so removed, so impotent, that our voices, our actions, surely would have no effect. That even our passion or concern for those unjustly treated would simply be absorbed and explained away, lost. That in the complexity of our world, in all the competing priorities and stories, that the values of justice, compassion, and the law of love are irrelevant, old-fashioned, idealistic, quaint, and naïve.

The steady stream of information and “experts” that we take in erodes our deeply held values that to live a life of faith is to live in right action, reflecting God’s concern for creation in our words, in our listening, in the choices we make each and every day.

It mattered to Naboth. It matters still.

This is a hard story. We witness behavior that is devious, self-indulgent, and dangerous. And when we come to the end of the story, at least where we end today, we witness the wrath of God, a God that holds accountable the ones who have betrayed love and justice for greed. What do we do with God’s response? What does it prompt in our own hearts? What concerns does it engage in our own world? I wish that this story were simply a story and not a reality played out over and over and over again in the world around us, but wishing doesn’t make it so.

Who do we hold accountable for the injustice and violence suffered by Naboth? Do we blame morally vacant and whiney king Ahab? Or was it Jezebel, who purposefully used his fragile ego to instigate a series of unfortunate events? What about the religious leaders of Jezreel, who knowingly carried out this terrifying plan of a religious event, turned into mob violence? There were many voices, there – what if they had together schemed to counter this plot, thereby weathering the storm of terror that probably would have resulted from their disobedience by Ahab and Jezebel?

Or do we hold their ancestors accountable, who failed to teach the proper role of a sovereign as prescribed in the Hebrew tradition, to care for those entrusted to their power, to defend the widow, the orphan, the foreigner? Who taught that royalty’s power should endure unchecked, and that religious laws require blind obedience?

They were following the laws of Leviticus, after all, that do prescribe death by stoning for cursing God. But everyone knew that Naboth was innocent. His only crime was following the law of God over the law of King.

I can't help but find parallels between this story and this part of the unfolding part of our collective national story on immigration and just immigration policy. Clearly, our history is filled with stories, policies, and memories that fill us with pride, remorse, and anger as we recount the history of immigration in this nation of immigrants. We all have a story, whether it has been told to us or not. Certainly our collective story is not over. So now, recent laws enacted in Arizona have raised the dialogue to a new urgency, a new intensity. Because a national will to update our laws, policies, and quotas has failed, local communities grapple with the challenges in ways that they feel will address the difficulties and injustices faced.

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement and subsequent economic agreements have opened our borders to the will of the market economy, the only change in our national immigration policies have come in the form of increased border patrol, which has resulted not in a decrease in border crossings from the south, but new patterns of border crossings. Immigrants are crossing increasingly more dangerous terrain by increasingly more dangerous methods. There are more deaths than ever as a result of unauthorized border crossings by non-US citizens. Many are not counted and will never be counted, for the desert deals swiftly with the dead. Border communities in Arizona and elsewhere, are faced with new and difficult challenges as a result of these changes in patterns and increased numbers of immigrants. The only thing that has stemmed the tide of immigration appears to be the slump in the US economy: less jobs, less immigration.

So our national dialogue on immigration policy and practice has reached a feverish pitch in recent weeks. With the passage of the Arizona Law SB1070, a new law that will place new obligations on local police in Arizona to enforce immigration laws and that criminalizes most associations with undocumented foreigners in the state, much attention has been given to immigration policy reform, or the lack thereof, and the real dilemmas both citizens and immigrants face every day. There is much anger on all sides, and passion runs deep. There is a long history and real lives effected here, in the "immigration debate." By virtue of our presence in this national community, whether we like it or not, we too are drawn into the conversation. And I look forward to engaging this conversation within and beyond this community of faith. For we may not have the power of kings and queens, or presidents or senators, but we do have *some* power, and with it comes the responsibility to use it for good and not for our own selfish ends, individually or collectively.

But more compelling even than our responsibility to our national community, how we treat the foreigner among us, how we are neighbors to one another, how we treat the poor, the despised, the stranger, and the outcast - these are deeply spiritual issues. This is about justice. And we know that God cares deeply about justice: we are called to do likewise. What does God ask of us, through our sacred stories and faithful discernment, as we participate in this critical conversation?

We must not allow ourselves to be detracted by the complexity or the rancor of the debate: for our policies and practices are the real ways we work out life in the human community. God cared about justice for Naboth. Is God's concern less for the poor, the voiceless, and the marginalized of our world? It is not a question of our participation. The citizens of Jezreel too may have thought that because they were not making direct decisions, they were not implicated in injustice against Naboth. But we can see that passive compliance with injustice allows it to continue unchecked all the same. To not participate is a choice. With it comes the risk of God's imperative for compassion and justice being silenced.

So how do we engage in this confusing and contentious conversation? I think Brueggeman's reminder is important: we can engage in courageous imagination, grounded by trusted texts. And I believe our first obligation is to listen, and then listen more. To ask ourselves: Do we understand, as best we can, the motivations and priorities of those whose are being heard? Whose voices are missing from the conversation? At first glance, Naboth's denial of the King's offer might have appeared simple willfulness. But when we look deeper to the context of his faith and experience, we realize that there was good reason for his rejection of the

King's offer. Are we listening deeply to the stories (and there are more than we can count) of immigrants themselves? What have they left behind? What are they seeking? What desperation causes such desperate action? How have our economic and immigration policies worked together or against each other to create profound conflict on our borderlands? Are we listening deeply to the voices of those who live on the borderlands, their fears, hopes, concerns? What has brought the citizens of Arizona to support this new law? What concerns do others in our country share?

And if we do not know with whom to engage in these conversations, how do we begin the good work of engaging in honest relationship beyond our usual circle of friends? How might our engagement in this conversation move us then to deeper relationship with those who feel alienated? Misunderstood? Silenced?

How might we be informed by our own stories? How do our own stories of immigration and that of our foreparents, of being foreigners in a strange land, inform our own engagement in the conversation? There are a lot of questions to be explored in this important conversation. We will hear the strident voices on the radio, on the internet, and in print. But God's demands of us are clear. We are called to the work of justice.

God's imperative of our right action are no less than they were for Elijah.

So where do we look for the Elijah's, and the poets and novelists and preachers, the visionaries and the victims who remind us that life amounts to more than what we acquire, more than whom we know, more than the places we go and the food we eat? They call us to ask of ourselves: wherein have we fallen short and made things increasingly worse? Where has our silence, action, or inaction allowed evil to go unchecked or to multiply?

I am committed, and I look forward to having this conversation on immigration in this community, where we can openly engage the resources of our tradition as the lens through which we discern right decision, and prayerfully purposeful action. For God cares, in eternal mercy and imminent judgment, God cares passionately. And so should we.