

Naboth's Stolen Vineyard: Yesterday and Today

King Ahab probably looked like this: 6 feet tall, 200 pounds, wearing a diaper and throwing a tantrum! He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. And when he couldn't get it, as the reading tells us, "he lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and wouldn't eat." Not only is the Bible full of grown men acting like toddlers, it's also full of stories of the kind of horrific treachery that spoiled king's wife inflicted.

Jezebel is King Ahab's wife. Naboth is the poor man whose heritage is a vineyard. Ahab wants the vineyard for a vegetable garden, just because it's close to the palace. Naboth won't sell. So Jezebel has poor Naboth set up and executed; stoned to death on a false charge. All so that the man with the power can get what he wants as he wants it.

Taken at face value, the story of Naboth is a tragedy of greed and self-centeredness. But the reading is more than just a story of one rotten king, one innocent peasant. It is a metaphor, an example, of the march of powerful nations, powerful corporations, powerful people, that overtake and destroy poorer nations, poorer people. It is a march that continues to this very day.

What struck me first in reading the story of poor Naboth was how much his story is like the story of the people of Guatemala, whom I had the privilege of visiting several times. Their farms are on steep hillsides. Think of planting your crops on the sides of the ko'olau mountains, and you begin to get the idea. Corn grew almost straight out at a right angle. Farmers, every year, died from falling off of their fields, the fields are so steep.

Yet we also travelled through miles of lush, flat agricultural lands. When I asked why the farmers were not using those fertile, flat lands, the response was always the same. Fruit companies from the north, from the US, took those lush lands 100 years earlier, removed the native farmers, and grew cheap fruits for export. Naboth's vineyard, stolen again.

The recent film about Princess Ka'iulani, while apparently loaded with historical inaccuracies, did get one thing right. The people of Hawaii lost their land to strangers who wanted what they wanted when they wanted it; strangers willing to

kill to get it. The theft of Naboth's vineyard has occurred right outside our doors.

That theft occurred to our friends from Micronesia, who, between 1946 and 1958 were the victims of 66 nuclear bombs exploding in their homeland and nearby waters. Consider this:

Early in the morning of March 1, 1954, a hydrogen bomb, code named Bravo, was detonated at Bikini Atoll. It was detonated even though our government knew that prevailing winds had shifted the night before, and instead of carrying the deadly fallout over open ocean, it would carry instead over populated islands. Department of Energy records verify this fact.

The area was illuminated by a huge and expanding flash of blinding light, as if two suns were rising in the east. A fireball of millions of degrees shot to the sky at 300 mph. Three to four hours after the blast, white, snow like ash, the remains of pulverized coral, began to fall from the sky onto the people living on the islands. The ash was two inches deep, turned the drinking water a brackish yellow, and, as children played in the fallout, like a kind of deadly snow, they experienced diarrhea, vomiting and hair loss. Many died. The people had received no explanation or warning from the US government. [J. Niedenthal, Bikini Atoll, March, 2008].

Our friends from Micronesia who arrive in Hawaii today, those who are now members of St. E's, they are the Naboth's, and the children of Naboth, right in our midst.

It is said that a person can choose only within the world she can see.

I share these many stories of the theft of Naboth's vineyard, thefts that continue to this very day, so that we who are often shielded from those worlds might enter them, and in the entering, be changed.

Preaching the readings can raise unpleasant questions. Preaching the readings can put a mirror to our collective face, and challenge us to look deeply at what to see.

It was into that mirror that Simon looked, a mirror held up by Jesus as we hear of the strange events occurring in today's gospel. Simon invited Jesus into Simon's world. It was a world of privilege, of set expectations.

Women didn't take down their hair in front of strange men in Simon's world.

Visitors to Simon's world gave Simon respect, gave Simon courtesy, gave Simon honor. Simon was quick to size up a situation; quick to judge; quick to put people in their place. And into Simon's world, came Jesus. And just as he does to your world and mine, Jesus turned Simon's world upside down.

The prostitute's tears became a water basin, her hair a clean towel, her cracked-open heart, filled with forgiveness.

And all of Simon's certainty is confounded. Indeed, contrary to Simon's judgment, Jesus knew "what kind of woman this was." Indeed, contrary to Simon's judgment, Jesus was a prophet and something far greater than a prophet.

Jesus invited Simon to look at his world, to look at his surroundings, to look at the people in his life from a completely different point of view.

Jesus is the lens through which we look and see the Kingdom of God. Through that lens, Jesus reveals that the world we live in is not what it appears to be. The people we face every day are not the people we think they are. The roles and classes and castes, the categories; they are an illusion that we create.

An illusion that Jesus, gently, quietly, yet persistently, explodes!

When Jesus says the first shall be last and the last first, that he who humbles himself will be exalted, and he who exalts himself humbled, think of spoiled King Ahab and think of Naboth. Think of Simon and think of the harlot. But think also of the poor farmers of Guatemala, and ourselves.

Think of our Micronesian brothers and sisters, and ourselves. Think of Princess Ka'iulani and ourselves.

"A person can choose only in the world she can see."

May we be given the grace to see the world through the lens that is Jesus, and in the seeing, be changed.

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