

Sunday: June 13, 2010

Scripture: OT I Kings 21:1-10

NT Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Sermon: Man's Greed/ God's Judgment

Call to Worship: Psalm 5:1-8

Give ear to my words, O Lord,

Consider my sighing.

Listen to my cry for help, my King

And my God, for to you I pray.

In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice;

In the morning I lay my requests before you

And wait in expectation.

Your are not a God who takes pleasure in evil

With you the wicked cannot dwell.

The arrogant cannot stand in your presence;

You hate all who do wrong.

You destroy those who tell lies;

Bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors.

But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house;

In reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple.

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness;

Because of my enemies...

Make straight your way before me.

Choral Response: Lead Me Lord by: Samuel Wesley

Hymns: #464 Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

405 What Does the Lord Require

366 Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me

Prayer of Confession:

We know you, O Lord, as a loving and kind God. We depend upon your love and kindness to overshadow our failures and shortcomings. And we confess to you that we prevail upon your grace and do not take responsibility for our greed and avarice. We trample on your commandments. We covet what others have. We shade the truth in order to get what we want. We twist the truth in order to achieve what we want in life. As individuals and as a people we fall far short of the image of Christ which you have set before us. Forgive our wayward ways and return us to paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Amen.

Sunday: June 13, 2010

Scripture: OT I Kings 21:1-10 (11-21)

NT Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Sermon: Man's Greed/ God's Judgment

Our Old Testament passage for the morning opens up a broad discussion of what power the legal authorities have over the average man or woman over whom the authorities rule. It is a discussion that has raged in almost every generation, for practically no government is free from the excesses of personal greed and avarice. And even the best intended powers often fail to protect the very segment of the population that they are sworn to protect.

Our story begins during the time of Ahab who reigned in Israel for about 21 years. We can date his kingship from the year 874-853. This was during the time when the Kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). One of the things that we must note is that while the Northern Kingdom was fraught with power struggles and coups, changing Kings almost as readily as we change Presidents, The Southern Kingdom was blessed with a stable and long serving King. King Asa reigned in Judah for over 41 years and the land around Jerusalem was blessed with prosperity .

It is noted in the 30th verse of the 16th Chapter of I Kings that “Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him.” Oh my, we say to ourselves. What did Ahab do? What evil could he have done that would get him the reputation of having done more evil than all who were before him? Our minds can imagine all sorts of evil: murder, rape, incest. We think of King David and how he ordered Bathsheba's husband into battle on the front line so he could have Bathsheba for his wife. That was pretty rank, don't you think? What more could Ahab have done?

Well, if you continue reading in the 16th chapter of I Kings you will discover that Ahab took as one of his wives, a woman from Sidon. Her name was Jezebel. And to make Jezebel happy, he began to worship her god.... Baal. Ahab even went so far as to have altars to Baal erected throughout the Holy Land. So, what we have is a picture of a King who sought only to satisfy his own desires. Today, the name Jezebel is a code word for a strong headed, conniving and manipulative woman. But that does not excuse Ahab. He allowed Jezebel to manipulate him. Our story in chapter 21 is a good example.

It's a simple story. Up in Samaria in the region of Jezreel, Ahab a summer palace. And adjacent to this palace was a piece of land owned by a man named Naboth. Well, Ahab looked at Naboth's vineyards and says to himself, that would be mighty fine land upon which to plant a vegetable garden. So he calls in Naboth and offers him anything he wants for the land. I'll buy it! I'll swap you some other land for it! I'll give you a better vineyard than the one you have. But Naboth refuses to let the land go. And the reason Naboth gives for not selling the land is that it was land granted to his family when the Israelite children conquered the land. God had ordered that each tribe be given a

region and within each region families were apportioned land to raise cattle and sheep. And, this land is to remain within the family. (*Numbers 27:1-11; 36:9*) This was so important to God that they celebrated something called The Year of Jubilee. Every fifty years all land went back to the original families. Therefore, families that had fallen on hard times and had been forced to sell their land were restored to the land every 50 years. They could have a new beginning.

Well, Ahab becomes despondent at Naboth's response. Ahab knew the law and he could not simply take the vineyard from Naboth. Even a King cannot do that. But along comes Jezebel. She taunts Ahab, "Aren't you the King around here. Get out of bed and eat, I'll get that land for you." And there ensues some trumped up charges against Naboth which lead to his execution, along with his sons. And alas, Ahab ends up with the land.

He must have been very pleased with Jezebel. Like a spoiled child, Ahab got what he wanted. But in reality, Ahab got more than he bargained for. He got the prophetic judgment of Elijah.

Which reminds me of the mythological story of the Greek god, Midas. He was so greedy. He had a little bit of gold, but he wanted more. In fact he wanted everything that he touched to turn to gold. What a wondrous thing it would be if all he had to do was touch an egg and it would turn to solid gold. Or he could touch a teapot, or a pottery bowl, or a wooden eating fork and it would turn to gold. Just think how rich he would become. So he placed his request before the pantheon of gods... after all Midas was not in the highest rank of gods. And when Apollo and Zeus and Aphrodite heard his request they granted it to him. Everything he touched turned to gold. "How wonderful!" you might think, until you remember that he had to eat. The food he touched turned to gold, the water he drank turned to gold at his lips. And when his daughter ran into his arms in a loving embrace, she too was turned to gold.

I have often wondered why we say of someone, "they have the Midas touch." Meaning that everything they touch, turns into gold, or at least is successful. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing, Midas discovered. Carolyn Sharp, Associate Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale University reminds us that "we learn from Midas that the joy and vitality of life are quickly extinguished by the stranglehold of greed on the imagination."

And that is what happened to King Ahab. His greed made him sick. Our Old Testament passage points up the toxicity of Ahab's obsession. He takes to his bed.

Now, I know none of us have ever been that obsessed over anything we craved. But haven't you wanted something so badly that you found yourself lying in bed trying to figure how you can fit it into your budget, or how you could justify going into debt just a little deeper so you can have it? And when we do figure out a way to get it, the happiness of getting it is overshadowed by the monthly payments. I know that feeling! And perhaps that is what a lot of this economic downturn is all about. I was reading an article about the economy in Greece. After years of being on the bottom of the European

economic scale, Greece began to flourish with the implementation of the new economy of the Euro. And young people began to live beyond their means. Credit was easy to get and living the good life became a way of life. No one put anything away for a rainy day. No one foresaw the day when the credit cards would have to be paid off. Like Midas, they thought that all they had to do was touch something and it became gold. Their obsession with the good life became their undoing. Now, all of Europe (and perhaps even us) are paying the price.

Our Old Testament Passage reminds us that God has set some standards for living together in communities. They are simple. Respect your neighbors' property. Do not covet. Be truthful about your neighbor. Do not bear false witness. Don't take what is not yours. Do not steal. And when our obsessions become so strong that we will violate these standards, we have violated not only our neighbor, but God as well.

Ahab paid the price in a horrible and painful death on the battlefield. Jezebel came to a tragic end as well. Just when you think that you can do anything you want because you have the power to do it, your obsession will turn around and bite you. God's righteousness will be satisfied. God's justice will prevail.

Now, there is one more lesson from this passage. In order to get the message we need to switch our minds away from thinking of this passage as being about one man and one woman and their conniving ways. We must understand this passage in terms of our national ethos. Ahab was King. His rule expressed his personal ethic.... Or lack of it. We must never forget that God's people are called to be the exact opposite of what Ahab stood for.

Let me simply share with you what Dr. Sharp understands as our responsibility as a nation. She writes:

Early and late in Israel's traditions, the prophets proclaim a God who is outraged by the exploitation of the powerless. Israel is repeatedly exhorted to protect the resident alien, the widow, the orphan. The holiness of God requires mercy toward the poor, as the Holiness Code makes clear in Leviticus 17-26. The socially marginalized must be allowed to glean in fields and vineyards; the deaf and the blind must be treated with equity; the elderly must be respected; Israelites must love the alien as themselves. The holy God is a God of mercy. Those who have been formed as God's holy people must themselves be merciful.

Now, this is Bob Button speaking. I think it is important to say very clearly. Sometimes we as a nation have become as obsessed about things as Ahab was about that vineyard that he wanted. And I am simply going to mention one area of our obsession.

The aliens within our gates. If you listen to the rhetoric coming from some folks, the only thing to do with people who come to America illegally is to throw them back across the border. Kick them out. Even if they have been living among us for 15 years as illegals, and their children were born in America, and they work hard to make a living

and they pick our fruit and vegetables, and mow our lawns and clean our houses. Even if they have paid their taxes and have contributed to our economy. They are still aliens and they are illegal, so throw them out. It has become a national obsession, so much so that our national legislature has become sick with this obsession and has taken to its bed. And no one can get them to move in any direction. So, Arizona has acted on this obsession.

I am the first to say: “I don’t have the answers!” Because the answers are complex. But to do what Jezebel did and act precipitously and to act out of emotional obsession is not the answer. Good people, acting in love and honoring God’s injunction to care for the alien in our midst can surely arrive at a solution that will both respect the alien and preserve our national integrity. And, in the end, demonstrate God’s love and mercy to all God’s people.

Ahab and Jezebel. Two names that will go down in the annals of history as perfect examples of what not to do. How will your and my name be written in the history books?

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