

You might as well sit back; I have some vineyard tales to tell you today.

Almost 3,000 years ago, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel ruled Israel.¹ And, even if you have never heard or don't recall the story of Ahab and Jezebel, you might recognize this queen's name. Even today, "Jezebel" is a synonym for treachery because she got blamed for the evil in their story. This wasn't just "blame the woman;" Jezebel was a Philistine who tried to turn Israel to the worship of Baal, and thus was despised by the people. But Ahab was guilty, also.

So here's the story. A man named Naboth of Jezreel had a vineyard. Now Naboth means "prophecies," so we are thus warned that his is a precautionary tale. And Jezreel was an important military stronghold in Ahab's kingdom; this was some vineyard, highly desirable. Unfortunately for Naboth, his land was located near one of Ahab's many palaces, and Ahab wanted it. So Ahab offered to swap some lesser land for Naboth's vineyard, but Naboth refused.

At this point Ahab and Jezebel made a devious plan to have Naboth falsely accused of treason. And the plan worked. Naboth was condemned, executed, and Ahab took the vineyard. God then sent the prophet Elijah to forecast the death of Ahab's whole family and to tell him that the kingdom would be given to others to rule.

Elijah's prophecy came to pass: Ahab and his entire family died in very messy ways. The people of Israel remember the story to this day. That's vineyard tale number one.

A hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah reused this story. He changed the details, though, enough so that the king against whom Isaiah used the story wouldn't recognize, at least at first, that he was being accused of being another Ahab. If we were using the Track 2 readings, the Isaiah passage would have been our first reading today instead of the Ten Commandments.

In Isaiah's version of THIS vineyard tale we hear of a vineyard whose vines refused to produce good fruit and a landowner who loved the vineyard dearly. The landowner clearly represented God. And the vineyard was all of Israel and its people. Just to be sure that his reference to the Ahab story wasn't missed, Isaiah's "zinger" was this: "[God] expected justice, but saw bloodshed."

I've told you these two vineyard tales so that you will hear the arc of the events from so long ago in leading up to our gospel lesson. Because our gospel lesson today was a set-up, a set-up by Jesus using the well-known vineyard motif that were so deeply embedded in Israel's history. In Jesus' version there was a productive vineyard, plus a group of bad tenants who coveted the profitable enterprise and tried to obtain the vineyard by violence and murder. Jesus asked the people listening to him tell this story what

should be done to the evil tenants. Their answer showed that they knew the Ahab story. They said, “The owner will put those wretches to a miserable death.”

That’s when Jesus closed his “I gotcha” trap. He switched metaphors on them, switched stories. He told them, using another quote from Isaiah, that the one—in other words, he, whom they had already rejected—would become the very thing on whom God’s future kingdom would rest. And Jesus told them that the vineyard, the kingdom itself, would be given to other tenants. Jesus was warning the Jews that they were heading for Ahab’s fate.

The Pharisees got Jesus’ message all right, and they were very unhappy about what he had said. The Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus right then and there, but they only didn’t do so because they feared the crowds, who regarded Jesus as a prophet.

That, right there, was a huge indictment of those particular Pharisees. The people half understood who Jesus was: they thought that he spoke for God, that he was a prophet. The Pharisees didn’t even credit Jesus with that much authority. THEY feared the crowds. Shouldn’t they have feared God instead? Even if Jesus was “only” a prophet, they should have feared God because, as a prophet, Jesus would have been delivering God’s message. Of course, we know that Jesus was much more than a prophet, that he WAS and IS and WILL BE the very one on whom the Kingdom of God rests.

Lest (using our 20/20 hindsight) we get too indignant with those Pharisees, perhaps we should ask ourselves who WE are in this story.

Are we the renters, the tenants, of the vineyard? And if so do we even KNOW that someone else—GOD—owns the whole property, the whole Kingdom, the whole vineyard, the whole world we inhabit? What kind of fruit are we producing in this vineyard we are renting? Good fruit of the spirit? Bad fruit? And how much of God’s produce are we giving back to God, who owns the whole kit and caboodle, anyway, owns the whole vineyard, and us, and everything in it?

Or are we the “slaves,” the people the owner has on tap to do his bidding in the vineyard that is this world? Do we understand that God has sent us to collect the rent, to collect the produce? Are we afraid to go, to speak up, afraid of the reception we will get in THAT vineyard, when THIS vineyard is so much more safe, inviting, safe, supportive, fun (did I mention safe)?

Or do we do our own bidding, forgetting that we are the owner’s and that we have the owner’s mission? Do we mistake the symptoms of the evil with the cause? Instead of going to the vineyard to do the owner’s work, do we go instead to get laws passed against sticks and stones and other assault

weapons, then congratulate ourselves on doing the owner's work? Or do we say things like, "THOSE tenants must have been mentally ill to have acted that way, and then prescribe ways to identify and treat such mental illness. And then congratulate ourselves on doing the owner's work?"

"NO!" I say. You can do these things if you feel you should. But let's not confuse the symptoms with the illness. We, as a people, are confusing ourselves with the "landowner." What this vineyard needs is fruit of the Kingdom of God, fruit of the landowner, good fruit. And what the landowner counts as good fruit is love and justice.

In John chapter 15 Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Jesus himself is the good fruit. We are to be Jesus in the vineyard that the owner has entrusted to us. And to do that we have to be in the vineyard, we have to do the owner's work and speak the owner's name. Otherwise, how will the other people in the vineyard know that the owner isn't just another absentee landlord?

¹ You can read this 9th century BCE story in 1 Kings 21 and in 2 Kings 9.