

**1 Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3**

**A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes  
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA  
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I want to move from this story of astonishing *devotion*<sup>1</sup> back to our Old Testament reading for today – what is in some ways its polar opposite – a breath-taking tale of *idolatry*. I learned it as a child bored in the pews, flipping through the Bible (in search of juicy stories of kings and queens . . . repelled by Ahab and Jezebel who do indeed get devoured by the dogs!). Back then I would not have pegged this story as one about *idolatry*. The golden calf, definitely . . . the contest on Mt. Carmel, sure – *there* you have the altars and chants, people swaying, bowing down to fake gods; that’s how I thought about idolatry. In *this* story was greed and selfishness – much easier to relate to, really. I think I discovered this story soon after my sister’s sixth birthday. That night I had wept in bed (just like Ahab!) over the big stuffed dog my sister had gotten as a present. In all the days since, that dog had smiled at me (a cheerful little puppy dog smile) from my sister’s side of the room. It was *right there*, you know? In my face, reminding me what I wanted, but could not have. *Not fair!* cried King Ahab. His was an anguish I understood, though what followed in his story was so awful, I could scarcely read it.

Here’s what I’ve learned about the story since:

Like me, with my bed-full of stuffed animals, King Ahab had far more than he needed. The seat of his kingdom was in Samaria, and his royal house in Jezreel (the one overlooking Naboth’s little vineyard) was a secondary palace. Naboth’s property was pretty and convenient, but hardly necessary for King Ahab to take.

Ahab wants to use Naboth’s property for vegetable garden. He doesn’t just steal the property; in fact, he offers Naboth a pretty good deal – a better piece of land someplace else, or if Naboth prefers, full payment in *cash* – whatever the land is worth. But there are a couple of problems with Ahab’s request – theological problems (and they distinguish Ahab’s greed from my puppy love).

- 1) The first relates (oddly enough) to Ahab’s longing for a vegetable garden. Now, he may just have loved green beans . . . but “vegetable gardens” are mentioned just two times in the Bible – here and in a passage from Deuteronomy. In that earlier story, the people of Israel are poised (finally) to inherit God’s Promised Land. Before they cross the Jordan into that land, Moses encourages them to love and obey God, who is giving them the land, full of milk and honey, unlike the land of Egypt from which they’d come, where they had slaved to plant and irrigate “as in a vegetable garden.” It seems a bit strange, but Ahab’s specific desire for a *vegetable garden* can serve to remind careful readers about things God’s people are meant to leave behind. Slave labor, injustice, scarcity and want – such things are evoked by the mention of a vegetable garden. Such things are

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<sup>1</sup> The gospel text.

evoked by Ahab's greed. It's offensive, then. To suggest turning Naboth's lovely vineyard – his Promised Land flowing with milk and honey – his precious gift from God – into a *vegetable garden* like the kind the Egyptians had – what everyone remembers as places of oppression and injustice . . . it was offensive not just to Naboth, but to God.<sup>2</sup>

- 2) Also offensive was Ahab's desire to take land that was part of another family's heritage. According to tradition, God had divided the land when the people of Israel entered it – providing enough for each of the tribes of Israel. In fact the ancient tribal divisions of land were outlined as part of God's law. To mess with that . . . well, "God Forbid!" as Naboth said. That land was his inheritance; the law specified that God wanted it that way.

As if Ahab's desire to rebuild Egypt on Naboth's little slice of heaven is not bad enough, consider Jezebel's response to her husband's pouting. She sees him crying in bed and says "Do you now govern Israel?" I wonder how she said it. Was she sarcastic? (Is *this* how it looks to govern?) Or did she mean to encourage Ahab? (Dude! You're the governor!) Either way, the simple answer is yes, Ahab's in charge . . . but only if you have forgotten *who is really in charge* – THE ONE to whom every king and queen is responsible. And this whole story shows how completely King Ahab and Queen Jezebel have forgotten their responsibility to God and to God's purposes for them and for Israel.

Jezebel proceeds to break commandment after divine commandment to get Ahab what he wants. She finds a couple of scoundrels to bear false witness against Naboth, accusing him of cursing God and the king. Her intent is to murder Naboth; she orders his execution as punishment for his supposed crime. Then she instructs Ahab to go and take the land, since Naboth is not longer alive to claim it. The whole thing is a travesty of justice . . . it shows the king and queen's total disregard for divine law. It shows their blatant disregard for God.

*And if they did not revere the Lord, what did they revere?* "Themselves" is one answer. To have their wishes met at any cost. To do whatever pleased them. To see the land and its people bow down to them, fulfilling their cravings, suiting their purposes . . . . When we see the world as our oyster – imagining ourselves at the center of it all (when we see the world at our service, instead of the world – instead of *all things* – at *God's* service) we practice a kind of idolatry.

What's nice about this story is how black and white things are. It is clear that Ahab and Jezebel are in the wrong, so when Elijah tracks down the king to deliver God's curse, we know he has found the right, ahem, *behind* to kick. That is not how it is in most stories. Take the latest story to occupy our country's attention – the oil spill in the Gulf. Who is at fault? BP is the easy answer. They've taken responsibility for the spill; rightly so. But as the third largest oil company in the world, with hundreds of thousands of employees and shareholders living everywhere, who are we talking about exactly? The obnoxious CEO? The hard-working guys on the rig? When we speak of BP, are we

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<sup>2</sup> Marsha Wilfong's Exegetical Perspective on I Kings 21, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, general editors, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. p 125.

thinking “British Petroleum” as the company was formerly called? Do we cast our blame across the ocean more than we feel it here at home? Are you boycotting your local station? If so, why? Blame George Bush. Blame the environmentalists. It is surprising who people will blame. But where does it stop? Last Friday a middle school student from Baltimore – Bailey Saneman – put it nicely when she said, “There’s no need to point fingers because nowadays almost every household or business uses oil.” Perhaps, as she concluded, our greed is to blame.<sup>3</sup> We want oil, right? When we pull up to the “service station” we expect to find oil *at our service*. The natural world *at our service*, near our houses, without delay. It is more than greed. It’s a kind of idolatry.

In the book I’m hoping you’ll read – *An Altar in the World* – Barbara Brown Taylor writes not about idolatry and its dangers, but about reverence and its benefits. How can we step down from our ill-gotten places at the center, to resume our proper places in the word God made? One way is to pay attention to that which is bigger than we are – God, for instance. But also nature, justice, wisdom (concerns we jettison when we “sell ourselves” to evil and greed). *To pay attention* to what is outside of you and beyond your control is the beginning of reverence, Barbara says.

She provides an image that is helpful, I think – overwhelming though it may be. She says that if you’re paying attention, even a mail-order catalog can become a sacrament – a visible sign of an inward, spiritual connection.

How so?

First [Barbara says, consider] the people who produced the catalog – the designers, the photographers, the models, and the copyeditors – along with the people who produced the goods inside. Some of those people live in Mexico and others in the Philippines. In China, where cashmere goats are bred to produce sweaters for American consumers, traditional grasslands are so overgrazed that thousands of square miles turn to desert each year. If you could lay a laminated map of the world on the floor and put a pin in every place where something in that mail-order catalog came from, you might be amazed at how prickly the map became.

Then there is the paper and the ink. I do not know where the ink in all my catalogs came from, but I know something about the paper. Four miles from my house, there was once a sizable forest of pines. White-tailed deer lived there, along with skunks, raccoons, and a flock of wild turkeys. Then one day the loggers came. It took them a couple of weeks to reduce the forest to stumps, but they did it. When I drove by, I could smell the sap as strongly as if it had leaked on my hands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/readersrespond/bs-ed-oil-spill-letter-6-20100611,0,1900456.story>

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, HarperOne, 2009. 31-32.

To pause over the sacrament of the catalog can be painful. We see how we are part of the web of cause and effect – the felling of the forest, the ruin of the grasslands, the spilling of the oil. But, it can increase our reverence, too – for other people and the parts of the world they cherish, for justice that is hard to practice in the presence of greed, for the earth – crying out in pain, calling out for kindness . . . even for God – who has made us stewards of the earth, and responsible for each other. To contemplate such things can help us to *get outside of ourselves* and outside of our wants and desires (as Ahab never was able to do). It's a first step away from idolatry . . . toward reverence.

I cannot leave the pulpit today without returning to Luke, and to the women in today's lesson who show us how reverence looks. One woman knelt behind Christ aware of her need for him, her *love* for him . . . and she washed his feet with ointment and tears – an extravagant act of devotion. Other women are mentioned, too – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others –who brought what *they* had to Jesus and the twelve, *giving* what they could to support a ministry they valued. Their example is *the opposite* of Ahab and Jezebel's, isn't it? And where Ahab and Jezebel's behavior provoked God's curse, these women obtained God's blessing. Forgiveness, peace, healing, community – these are some of the blessings the women received and enjoyed for a long time – *forever*, some say. Certainly longer than Ahab enjoyed that field.