

A Summer of Prophet Sharing: Elijah #2 – On Loan From God
1 Kings 21:1-21, 27-29 Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rolf Svanoe

Exactly three weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, I was in Wittenberg, Germany with a tour group visiting the Martin Luther sites. We saw the house where Luther lived, now a museum. We saw the City Church, the place where Luther preached many of his sermons. But the highlight for me was a visit to the Castle Church, where Luther is buried. It was there in 1517 that Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door, an event that set in motion the Reformation. These were 95 arguments against the sale of indulgences in which Luther said that the church cannot sell forgiveness of sins and people cannot buy their way into heaven. People are made right with God as a gift of God's grace. People receive that gift through faith in Jesus Christ, not through their offerings or good works.

Now Luther was a Bible scholar. And he knew that his interpretation of the Bible went against the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church at the time. A few years later Luther was called to a meeting where all the powers of the Empire and the Church had gathered and demanded that he renounce his heretical teachings. Imagine if you can Luther standing before the Emperor and the Pope's representatives. The pressure brought to bear on him was enormous. To refuse meant he would be excommunicated and could be hunted like a criminal or burned at the stake. I imagine Luther felt the weight of his decision. He asked for an extra day to consider. And then he stood before the Emperor and the leaders of the Church and he said, "No!" He would not renounce his teaching. He could not go against his conscience, even when many others were telling him he was wrong. No, Luther said, they were wrong. His teachings were based on the Bible. And then he uttered his famous line, "Here I stand and can do no other."

In speaking a word of truth to those in power Luther was acting much like the prophets of the Old Testament. The prophets were people who were captured by God's Spirit and compelled to speak a word of truth to those in charge. One of my seminary professors had a saying that in the Old Testament the times of the Kings were the times of the prophets. The kings held great power back then. We have a system of checks and balances built into our form of government, executive, legislative and judicial branches that limit each other's power. But the kings then had few people who could check their power. And when the kings abused their power, when they broke the laws God had established, it was the prophets God used to call them to change. The prophets weren't a bunch of dreamy-eyed, crystal-ball gazers predicting the distant future. Far from it. They were the social critics of their time. They knew the truth behind the current events and the lies and propaganda of those in power. They spoke God's truth to their time. If they predicted the future it was simply to warn people of the consequences facing them if they stayed on the same path.

The prophets knew what a good king was supposed to look like. Psalm 72 gives a job description for a good king. **"Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a**

king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor."

When the king does God's will there is great blessing that comes to the whole nation.

The story of Naboth's vineyard is a story that shows what happens when kings turn bad and abuse their power. It's also the story of a prophet who had the courage to confront the King. Naboth owned a choice piece of land next to the palace. King Ahab wanted it. He approached Naboth with what he thought was a generous offer. He would pay Naboth what it was worth or trade it for a better piece of land. To our ears that sounds like a reasonable request. But this wasn't land that anyone could buy and sell. This was land that had been in the family for generations, and Naboth planned to pass it on to his children. Selling that land would have broken a law God gave that land stay with each family. So Naboth refused the King who went off and pouted that he couldn't get his way. The king had broken the 10th commandment- you shall not covet your neighbor's field. King Ahab had gotten caught and he knew it.

Enter Queen Jezebel. When she learned why Ahab was pouting she reminded him that he was the king. Where she came from kings always got their way, and it didn't matter what laws they had to break. She worshipped a different god, and had no regard for the laws of Israel's God. So she arranged to have Naboth falsely accused. The 8th commandment says you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Then she had Naboth condemned to death. The 6th commandment says you shall not kill. In the end King Ahab stole Naboth's land- breaking the 7th commandment. Do you see how breaking one commandment easily led to breaking another and another? When kings act like that, people notice. Grumbling and discontent spread. Instead of bringing a blessing the king brings a curse.

Enter the prophet Elijah. God told Elijah to go and confront King Ahab with his sin. Elijah told Ahab that he would lose his crown. He had planted the seeds of his own destruction. To his credit, Ahab responded by repenting and humbling himself before God. Queen Jezebel may not recognize any limits, but Ahab did. And God had mercy on him.

It's an age-old story, isn't it? The daily news is filled with stories just like it. Might makes right. Those in power using their position for their own aims, breaking the law regardless of the consequences or who gets hurt in the process. King Ahab's creed was- I want it and I'm going to take it.

But there is another way in which this story works, because I think we are all a bit like King Ahab. Aren't there times we are tempted to want something, and God says no. Whether it is King Ahab in his vineyard, or Adam and Eve in the garden, there are times when just like them we want things we can't have, or shouldn't have. God says no. But like Queen Jezebel, or like the serpent in the garden, we hear the voice of the tempter- "Did God say no? You're the king. You can have whatever you want." It may start innocently enough, but little sins often lead to

bigger sins, and then we're in a pile of trouble, and innocent people often get hurt. That's when we need a prophet to step in and bring us a warning.

This summer as we learn about the prophets I hope that we will also discover how Jesus was very much like a prophet. He came to challenge injustice and to speak God's truth to his world. Remember on Palm Sunday how he cleansed the Temple and accused those in charge of turning a house of prayer into a den of thieves? That's what got him killed. God sent Jesus to offer us forgiveness of our sins, to redeem us from a selfish way of life and to invite us to follow him, to show us a better way to live. We will reap what we sow. If we sow seeds of injustice, we will eventually reap a harvest of destruction. If we sow seeds of love, compassion and justice, we will reap a harvest of goodness. Build your lives around love- love for God and love for neighbor, even love for the enemy. In doing so God's blessing will be upon us and flow from us to others.