

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, July 20, 2008
Selections from I Kings 16-22
“Who is this Jezebel?”

I Kings 16:29-33 -

Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah. Ahab son of Omri was king over Israel for twenty-two years. He ruled from Samaria. Ahab son of Omri did even more open evil before GOD than anyone yet—a new champion in evil! It wasn't enough for him to copy the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat; no, he went all out, first by marrying Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and then by serving and worshiping the god Baal. He built a temple for Baal in Samaria, and then furnished it with an altar for Baal. Worse, he went on and built a shrine to the sacred whore Asherah. He made the GOD of Israel angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Really?

Those are some pretty harsh words – Ahab and Jezebel! “Champions of evil,” and “made God angrier than anyone else?” Wow.

I am giving some attention in these summer days to “interesting stories from the Bible.” So many of these stories come from the Old Testament, which we might dismiss as ancient and less than pertinent to our lives as we follow Jesus. But I think even in these harsh words about harsh people, we can learn much and be inspired in faithful living.

Our focus today is Jezebel – we have all heard the name. But who is this Jezebel? The very mention of her name probably triggers an avalanche of associations, most of them no doubt negative. For many of us, she comes to mind much like the mean witch in the Wizard of Oz. Wasn't everyone afraid of her? Isn't Jezebel one of those scheming, deceiving women in the Bible?

I have another association with the name “Jezebel.” In our family there has been passed down through the years this really spicy hot sauce that goes with ham – it is called Jezebel sauce. It seems to stay in a big mason jar in the refrigerator, but whenever you use it, you have to be careful – dabbing only a little next to your ham, otherwise it will overwhelm your

taste buds and ruin your whole meal. The point is consistent with the woman in the Bible – Jezebel packs a punch. Watch out!

And what does that bumper sticker say – “well behaved women rarely make history”?

So just what did Jezebel do to make history? The text says she married Ahab – Ahab had his own problems, it looks like. “He did more open evil than all who went before him,” it says. Is Jezebel just guilty by association? Or is there something more?

And is Jezebel just mean and evil, packing a punch? Or does she have something to teach us? Is she all devious and deceitful, or also part diva – a woman of power and class and some importance? Let’s give it a look.

Any discussion of Jezebel relates to two prominent subjects in the book of First Kings: Baal and Elijah, the prophet. Prophets, you recall, are people appointed by God, called by God, to speak God’s word, usually calling people back to faithfulness, to righteous living, to justice lives, to loving God and serving God. Sometimes prophets speak to kings and queens and leaders. Sometimes prophets speak to the people. The Bible is full of prophets whom God uses to direct, encourage, convict, coerce, do whatever it takes to get the attention of God’s people and guide them in God’s way.

Elijah, the prophet, appears on the scene in I Kings 17. He has one main job – to rally the people back to the covenant – that agreement between God and the people: God would be their God and the people would worship and serve God. Elijah’s sole purpose was to help the Israelites move away from worship of Baal, and to lives of faithfulness serving Yahweh, not Baal.

Now, obviously Baal, according to the Bible, is not the way to live. Baal faith was quite complex: while Baal was indeed the name of a god; there tended to be many gods in Baal – gods of thunderstorms and rain and weather, gods of fertility and the farming seasons, gods of love and abundance. And this complex cult of Baal was widespread in the ancient world across many centuries. The cult of Baal was certainly prominent in the land of Canaan – where the Israelites were emerging. In a farming culture, it would be tempting to worship the fertility gods. In a culture where life depended on rains, it would be easy to worship the gods of rain and weather.

Perhaps it is not unlike the consumer culture that we know. If you step back and look at our lives, what do we worship? Whom do we really serve? It is not so easy to tell, is it? Yes, we are in the sanctuary singing and praying and worshipping God, but we are all dealing with other issues and

things that we may well worship. How do we prioritize our lives? According to our covenant with God and God's covenant with us? Or are our lives about our pursuit of things, with money, with new toys, selfish intent? What might Elijah that prophet say to us in these days?!?

See, culture always has huge influence in our lives. What is our heart's desire? How easy we are led away to that which is around us? How easy it is to be caught up in various pursuits. We often need a prophet to come among us, and push us about what we care most about? Do we care mostly about our own well-being, or the needy among us? Are we living as God's people, or we living as our own people, justifying our ways?

These are constant problems. And it is never as clear as we might think it is – our lives, our worship, our faithfulness can get entangled with many things other than God. Prophets often appear on the scene to get our attention, to keep us focused, to help us imagine another way – God's way.

So Elijah the prophet had many challenges in dealing with the cult of Baal when Ahab and Jezebel ruled the region in the mid 9th century B.C. What people wanted was good crops, good weather, fertile land and fertile lives. It would be easy to fall into the cult of Baal, don't you think? Elijah's job was to get everyone's attention and help them know that Yahweh, not Baal, was and is the God of all – creation and crops, sun and rain, life and death. That is Yahweh – God of all things.

And Elijah makes this point dramatically. He challenges the Baal prophets to a stand-off, a showdown. Two altars - one to Baal, one to Yahweh. It is a big scene at Mt Carmel – recorded in I Kings 18. Each group can call on their gods/God – and that story is a sermon in itself. And sure enough, Elijah and Elijah's God prevailed, even against all odds. It was Yahweh who brought the rains in the face of famine in the land, not Baal. It was Yahweh who proved present and real, not Baal. So Elijah had all the Baal prophets killed for corrupting the people.

This dramatic story is meant to be an affirmation of God's reality, God's presence, God's power, God's importance in all of life. That is what needs to be learned then and now. God is real. God is at work. God cares and is the One we look to in our lives, with our deepest needs and hurts, our worst heartaches and hopes. That is the essence of the story of Elijah at Mt Carmel – and it is a story many of us need to hear again and again, especially as we come upon challenge and setback, which inevitably come our way. Amidst the issues of life, we might be tempted to look for other gods; but the Lord of Life, the Creator, Christ, and Comforter of all, Yahweh, is our help and strength in all times.

But after that showdown – with Elijah seeking to serve as God’s prophet and show the people that Baal had no power – after that showdown, Jezebel, comes on the scene. Jezebel, remember, is married to Ahab, the king of Israel. Their marriage is the result of an alliance between Israel and Sidon. But Jezebel is part of the Baal cult. This is her faith and her culture. She is not part of the Israelite tribe. Moreover, she is a strong and formidable figure. Following the Mt Carmel incident, Jezebel gets aggressive in defense of Baal. She starts seeking and killing God’s prophets and priests. A religious war breaks out. It is so bad that Elijah flees many miles south and hides in a cave in fear for his life because of Jezebel. It is in that cave that Elijah hears “the still small voice” from God – that familiar line in scripture - urging him to be strong, to keep on despite the challenges, to return to life and hope and wholeness. The story of Elijah is a great story full of excitement and intrigue and energy. It is a story that affirms God’s reality and power, God’s care and God’s covenant amidst the pressures and problems of life.

But as the story unfolds, Jezebel continues as the villain just as Elijah continues as the hero.

By I Kings 21, another character is added and the scene shifts to a vineyard.

Naboth the Jezreelite owned a vineyard in Jezreel that bordered the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. One day Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, "Give me your vineyard so I can use it as a kitchen garden; it's right next to my house—so convenient. In exchange I'll give you a far better vineyard, or if you'd prefer I'll pay you money for it."

3-4 But Naboth told Ahab, "Not on your life! So help me GOD, I'd never sell the family farm to you!" Ahab went home in a black mood, sulking over Naboth’s words, "I'll never turn over my family inheritance to you." He went to bed, stuffed his face in his pillow, and refused to eat.

5 Jezebel his wife came to him. She said, "What's going on? Why are you so out of sorts and refusing to eat?"

6 He told her, "Because I spoke to Naboth.. I said, 'Give me your vineyard—I'll pay you for it or, if you'd rather, I'll give you another vineyard in exchange.' And he said, 'I'll never give you my vineyard.'"

7 Jezebel said, "Is this any way for a king of Israel to act? Aren't you the boss? On your feet! Eat! Cheer up! I'll take care of this; I'll get the vineyard of this Naboth the Jezreelite for you."

8-10 She wrote letters over Ahab's signature, stamped them with his official seal, and sent them to the elders in Naboth's city and to the civic leaders. She wrote "Call for a fast day and put Naboth at the head table. Then seat a couple of stool pigeons across from him who, in front of everybody will say, 'You! You blasphemed God and the king!' Then they'll throw him out and stone him to death."

11-14 And they did it. The men of the city—the elders and civic leaders—followed Jezebel's instructions that she wrote in the letters sent to them. They called for a fast day and seated Naboth at the head table.... In front of everybody the two degenerates accused him, "He blasphemed God and the king!" The company threw him out in the street, stoned him mercilessly, and he died.

15 When Jezebel got word that Naboth had been stoned to death, she told Ahab, "Go for it, Ahab—take the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for your own, the vineyard he refused to sell you. Naboth is no more; Naboth is dead."

16 The minute Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he set out for the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite and claimed it for his own.

17-19 Then GOD stepped in and spoke to Elijah the Tishbite, "On your feet; go down and confront Ahab of Samaria, king of Israel. You'll find him in the vineyard of Naboth; he's gone there to claim it as his own. Say this to him: 'GOD's word: What's going on here? First murder, then theft?' Then tell him, 'GOD's verdict: The very spot where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, they'll lap up your blood—that's right, your blood.'"

20-22 Ahab answered Elijah, "My enemy! So, you've run me down!"

"Yes, I've found you out," said Elijah. "And because you've bought into the business of evil, defying GOD. 'I will most certainly bring doom upon you, make mincemeat of your descendants, kill off every sorry male wretch who's even remotely connected with the name Ahab.

Here we have the other major story of Jezebel. She is the driving, evil force, the conniving and scheming one who secures Naboth's vineyard for the King, her husband. While the king pouts, Jezebel acts. While the king moans and sulks, Jezebel secures the desired vineyard for her husband. She is the one who does the dirty work, which leads to Naboth's death, so that Ahab could get what he wanted, a garden next to his castle. The picture of

her remains consistent with the earlier story – she is ruthless and forthright, powerful and intimidating, formidable, someone to be feared.

And this is exactly why she has been vilified in tradition and history. She is the enemy of Elijah, the prophet. She carries out the dirty work for the king. In that sense, she has to go the way of Ahab, condemned to death for the evil. All of that completes the storyline which seeks to affirm faithfulness to Yahweh, faithfulness to the covenant. Jezebel remains the villain, along with Ahab – they represent improper worship and improper concern for others. Her reputation through the ages follows from those vicious acts that placed her opposite Elijah. She is devious, scheming, difficult, destructive to many of God's intentions and purposes.

But, as with all good stories, especially Scripture, we have to keep listening for what else we might learn for our lives and our times. In these days where we find ourselves wondering how to live with people of other traditions, other faiths, Jezebel is someone who possesses devotion and passion to her gods, to her culture. Perhaps we should not be so quick to condemn her. She may be the antagonist to Elijah in the story, but we might respect her for her commitments, her fortitude, her convictions. She deserves, no doubt, condemnation for her treatment of Naboth – that appears to be real evil. But she might be commended for stepping up in defense of her husband, the king. She was a person of strength, of devotion.

Perhaps one of our challenges in the present world is our tendency to simplify everything, when rarely are things so simple. Even as we learn about faithfulness to God and God's covenant, we also have to learn that religious wars, and killing one another in defense of our faith, cannot be what God intends either. Too many other places in the Bible call us to love our enemies, to work together, to help the needy, to feed the poor. We cannot just condemn Jezebel and keep acting with vengeance and violence claiming that God is on our side, which might be a real tendency. When are we going to learn that religious wars get us nowhere, and that the best religions work to bring healing and hope to all of God's people?

Perhaps we need the grace to see and hear in this story our own tendencies. Rather than simply vilify Jezebel, we might recognize that she also represents us – our worst selves, scheming and deceiving to get our way. We know about those ways, when we are honest. This is not what God wants. When have we recently been about scheming and deceiving to get our own way? Maybe we need to consider when we have squashed others in our path to get our way, either as individuals, or a society. It is easy to vilify Jezebel and leave her as a nasty woman in the story. It is harder to let her be a lens to our own lives, to challenge us to deal better with

others, especially others who disagree with us, who are from another faith. When we can see Jezebel in all her complexities, we might find ways to move toward a more wholesome future, where we strive to build a better world, make space for those different from us, then really live as God's intends - with compassion, care, commitment, joy, and hope.

So, why in these days of summer do we think about these stories? And who is this Jezebel? She is the villain in I Kings, the enemy of Elijah, God's prophet. She does evil deeds for selfish gain for herself and her husband, Ahab. It is easy to see her like the wicked witch of the west – someone to be feared, someone to condemn. But she also might be part of each of us – sometimes scheming and selfish, sometimes mean and hateful, sometimes arrogant and rude. And we think about Jezebel in hopes that we never become complacent –

- there is no life without a task; there is no person without a talent;
- there is no place without a fragment of God's light waiting to be discovered and redeemed;
- there is no situation without its possibility of hope;
- there is no moment without a call to live and act as God's loving, caring, servant people. (see J. Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, p. 262)

What we are doing is continuing to grow in God's ways, seeking to become what God calls us to be – people who, like Jesus, seek to love God and love others, seek to be peacemakers and instruments of hope in all times, people who mend fragments of an all too broken world. This is where Jesus keeps calling us to go. May we go there together. Alleluia. Amen.

Prayer: May your love and mercy fill our hearts and lives. We commit ourselves to trusting, serving, following your way in Jesus. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, July 20, 2008, by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.