

Season of Creation — Land. 16/09/18

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Whose Land is it, anyway?

1 Kings 21:1-16 & Acts 4:32-37

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today we continue with our sermon series on the Season of creation and the main topic for this Sunday is Land, which I must admit is a very socially and politically sensitive issue in our context South Africa and has been the talk of the day in media, in our parliament, and everywhere else. It also has attracted great interest to the whole world, on how we engage with this phenomenon. In my reflections when I think about the land issue, I asked myself a question; "Whose Land is It Anyway"? Which is our theme for this morning.

There is a story my parents liked to tell and it used to make me feel embarrassed. When I was ten and my younger sister Anga was five, we would sit at the kitchen table together. And even at that young age, we could eat, and eat, and eat. And I knew there was one thing that drove her crazy. I could eat my food on my own, but she had to wait for some help to eat. And so after my plate was licked clean she was still waiting for her first bite, I would stare at her plate and point at something (more especially meat) and say, "Hey Anga... That's mine!"

Then she would scream and scream and say, "Not fair. It's not yours."

And then I'd get a big grin on my face and slide even closer. And point to another item and say, "Mine!" again. Then "Mine!" and "Mine!" and mine!" while pointing to everything on her plate.

It was the perfect way for a ten year old to torture her five year old little Sister. Everything, I was telling her, was mine. Nothing was hers.

This ten year old behaviour is the same way that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel act in the time of Elijah. Everything they see they simply point at and shout out, "Mine!" People, property, land, even God — it is all theirs, or so they think. And that is not surprising.

They simply act according to the ways of the world. In our world, everything belongs to the most powerful, the most wealthy, the most violent, and the most ruthless, The Property and Land. For example in our own Country there's a huge gap between the haves and the Have nots, leaving a legacy of inequality and insecurity amongst a large proportion of South Arica's population. Taking what you want from others is simply good business. Other people are just a means to their own ends. They are not neighbours, they are not friends, and they are not human beings made in God's image. They are only tools for their own gain.

So when Ahab sees a great property next to his palace, he immediately points at it and says, "Mine!" He thinks absolutely nothing of Naboth or his family. He doesn't even see the beautiful vineyard that already is built upon it. He knows nothing of the grapes or the wine that flow from that land. Instead, he wants to tear it all down and build his own plans — a vegetable garden — not to serve people or to feed himself, but to show off more of his power and wealth.

[This isn't even Ahab's first palace. His central palace is in Samaria. This is his second one in Jezreel, because one palace obviously is just not enough. How other kings would mock him if he only had one palace!]

But when he claims Naboth's vineyard, things don't go as he plans. Naboth doesn't want to leave. This is the soil his ancestors have ploughed, have sown, have toiled, and reaped. This is his home with neighbours and friends. This is the land with his memories and stories and pride. Naboth refuses to move, even to a king. It is a surprising and stirring stand of one man saying, this land is not for you only. It is not just for the powerful and strong-armed.

That is when Jezebel steps in. She is angry at Naboth, not so much because she wants the vineyard, but because he challenges her view of the world. He is a threat to her claim that might makes right. So she convinces the city elders, who act very embarrassedly and terribly themselves, to make up a story of Naboth cursing God and cursing the king.

They follow through in a scene that could be straight out of a gangster movie or Game of Thrones. They invite Naboth to sit as the prized guest at the head of an assembly during a fast.

And then, thinking, he is about to be honoured and with his defences down, two men sitting on either side of him, make up a story of Naboth.

They claim he was seen swearing against God and the king. Right on cue, the elders pretend to be surprised at this news and then drag him from his prized seat to the outside where they finish the plan and stone him to death.

It says later that his body was left in the street, unburied, and attacked by animals. It is a brutal and awful scene, where no one has a second thought about Naboth, about his family, or even about their own actions. After the murder, Jezebel and Ahab simply walk next door and claim the deed for the vineyard, thinking nothing more of what they have done.

Reading this, it is surprising at the lack of resistance to this plan. Ahab asks no questions. The city elders say nothing. Neighbours and friends of Naboth say nothing. The community and city of Jezreel hide this story. No one stands up. Everyone tries to forget.

But there is one who remembers. God remembers. God cannot forget about Naboth or his family. God does not forget about a single life. God does not turn a blind eye to injustice and oppression. This is not what God wants for the people of Israel.

For Israel, there is this crazy idea that the land belongs to God. The Land and everything in it is the Lord's. And God simply allows us to use it. The Land is not only for the rich or the powerful or the strong armed. It is for widows and orphans, hungry and hurting, neighbours and friends. We aren't meant to claim as much of this world as "Mine!" as we can. We are meant to share it with others and live together, and this emphasized in our second reading, in the Acts of the Apostles that "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possession, but everything they owned was held in common".

So God sends Elijah to rebuke Ahab and Jezebel, to show them that they do not have final say over this world and those who live in it. A prophet, challenging a king is a crazy and risky thing to do, but God cares that much about each person and each life. And Amazingly, Ahab listens. He realizes the evil he has done. He finally sees the life and the land, which do not belong to him.

As we read this story, we are troubled by it. We are troubled because we know this story has repeated many times throughout history and still goes on today. Our own history is full of this kind of action — from dispossession and forced removal of people from their land during the apartheid era, others banished to former homelands where land was communal and rights were still unclear. And there are still many places and times today where people get used and mistreated for the gain of others.

This is a passage that is meant to trouble us. It is a passage that is meant to make us ask, "Who are the Naboths of today? Who are the people who are wronged and mistreated?" And then it asks us, "Who will speak up for them, like Elijah spoke for Naboth?"

Those are hard questions and ones we should sit with. But this passage also asks us to do something else. It asks us to imagine a different way of viewing this world, a different way of viewing land and viewing our neighbours. What if Ahab, instead of demanding the land as a harsh ruler, visited Naboth as a neighbour and friend? What if he drank some of his wine and sat in his home and heard Naboth's stories and history? What if they shared a meal together? What if he found out how his family came into this land and cared for it and passed it down from generation to generation? I think that would have brought him far more joy than grabbing another piece of land. It would have brought him far more pleasure and fulfilment than his futile quest of accumulation, trying to prove to others his own self-worth.

This story invites us to stop acting like me when I was ten years old pointing at everything I saw and claiming, "Mine!" It invites us into a new way of community, of seeing this earth as God's, as a gift given to all of us to share and to use together.

This month we celebrate our heritage, our history,¹ our past, our background as a nation. And on the 24th September I hope we mark this event as the cathedral. But as we celebrate this month, maybe it is also a chance for us to think of what kind of nation we want to be. Will we be a people that simply try to grab as much as we can for ourselves? Or will we be a community that welcomes strangers, shares stories, and serves

neighbours?... Will we be neighbours who sit down with one another on the porch or by the braai stands? Will we watch children play games with one another, not worrying about skin colour or what places they came from? Will we make sure that our senior citizens, our homeless, our sick and our hurting are not used as a means to an end, but instead are seen and cared for as we all should be seen — as a human being created in God's image?

This earth is the Lord's. It is not Ahab's. It is not Jezebel's. It does not belong to the wealthy or the powerful. It is God's. And it is a gift to each one of us. So let us use it well. Let us plant it. Let us grow it. Let us share it. And let us live in it together, as a community filled with gratitude, hope, and love. Amen.