

Who Speaks for God?

A Sermon offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle, Pastor
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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1 Kings 21:1-21

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death." The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?" You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood." Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel..."

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"Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite..."

1 Kings 21:17

Who speaks for God? Who speaks that voice of soul and conscience that calls us to a deeper perception of who we are and what we are to do? Who gives voice to the Still Speaking God and tells us what is good and what is evil; what is just and what is unjust; what is love and what is fear or hate. How do we discern God's voice amidst all the competing voices?

Traditionally, people have turned to some authority – an institution, a religious leader, or a book. The Jewish person speaks with authority when he or she proclaims, "Thus says the Lord..." The Catholic person speaks with authority when he or she says "The Church has always taught..." In the protestant wing of the church, the fundamentalist or evangelical-conservative person speaks with authority by saying

"The Bible says..." In the United Church of Christ, and in many mainline protestant churches, we speak with authority when we say, "Brothers and sisters, it seems to me..."

And you wonder why they say that pastoring a United Church of Christ congregation is like herding cats? It is because of that "It seems to me" part. But I don't think I would want it any other way!

Many Protestants today still say that the Bible is our authoritative voice of God. But some have turned this idea into an absurdity, insisting that we must take the Bible literally, believing that it is without error because God wrote it. This seems to me to be a distraction, and incredulous at best!

Some have even skewed the idea of biblical authority beyond recognition, making the Bible into some sort of idol. This false worship is so rampant that someone even came up with a name for it: bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible. It seems to me that some have forgotten that we worship the God revealed to us in the Bible. It seems to me that some seem to not realize that we worship God, whom we experience as present in our midst, somewhere off the pages of holy writ. It seems to me that some, in their religious zeal and in their need for a certainty that can be nailed down, have forgotten that we do not worship the Bible. THE BIBLE IS NOT GOD.

Yet, even if we say that the Bible is somehow authoritative for us (and I do say that), whose interpretation of the Bible do we accept? Which parts of the Bible do we name as formative and relevant and helpful and which ones do we reject? The Book of Leviticus says that we should execute witches, and men that lie with men, and those who work on the Sabbath. Is that what we think the voice of God is saying to us? In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he says that "*women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.*" (1 Corinthians 14:34) Is this how we would want to organize our Christian community today?

Even in our reading from 1 Kings today, the ending is of this story is difficult to swallow. Elijah responds to Ahab's question, "*Have you found me, O my enemy?*" with these words:

"I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel..."

That is where the lectionary ends the reading for today. But if you read on, it just gets worse:

"and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. Also concerning Jezebel the LORD said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.' Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.'" (1 Kings 21:22-24)

Should we attribute these kinds of actions and responses to the word and way of God? It seems to me that this kind of material is the work of interpreters and editors, human beings, trying to make sense of their story with God in their own time and setting. But just because this material is the Holy Bible, do it make it the voice of God? I don't think so! Yes, this text is part of our sacred, authoritative scripture. It is sacred and authoritative NOT because God wrote it, but sacred and authoritative because it is part of honored spiritual heritage. It is part of the written record of our faith tradition. And in that light, it seems to me that we are free to fuss with the text! And not only free to fuss, but our tradition demands that we must fuss with it in order to make this faith of ours our own in our own day and time. Don't you just love this "it seems to me" tradition?!

And yet, in the Hebrew scriptures, it is above all the prophet who speaks for God. It is said that the Spirit of God is on these people called prophets. Their task is not to foretell the future, but to proclaim the mind and will and word of God in the present situation and circumstances. The usual phrase used by the prophet is "Thus says the Lord". Last week, Carol Alexander introduced you to Elijah, the prophet. This week, I'm going to pick up where she left off.

Long ago in a country far, far away, there lived a King named Ahab. Ahab had a powerful army. He ruled over many tribes and many cities. He was the second king of one of the most dominant dynasties Israel ever knew. Ahab formed a strategic alliance with the mighty Phoenecian city states of Tyre and Sidon by marrying a princess of their royal family, the lovely and infamous Jezebel. Now, Jezebel is not a name you would want to give your daughter.

A few years ago, just after our niece Jamie came to live with us, we were listening to Chely Wright's song called *Jezebel*. It is a great country song! Innocently, Jamie told me that she really liked the named Jezebel and that if she ever had a daughter she would like to name her Jezebel.

I said, "Girl, are you crazy? Did you not hear the words to the song? Naming someone a Jezebel is like calling someone a nasty name."

Jamie said, "Oh, that's just a song. I still like the name."

I then asked her, "Have you ever heard the biblical story of Jezebel?" Jamie looked at me with wonderment, "It's in the Bible?" So I told her the story. After that, with disappointment in her voice, she said, "I guess I won't be naming my daughter Jezebel."

By the way, this is totally off the subject, but if you haven't already heard, Chely Wright is the country singer who just came out as the first openly lesbian or gay country star. I'm sure there are many folks who are wanting to call her a Jezebel today. If you haven't already heard her tell her story on Oprah, I would suggest that you look it up on YouTube. It is a very powerful and poignant coming out story. A great gift to Pride month!

Now, back to the Bible! Jezebel was an ardent devotee of her nations' ways. She brought priests from the Temples of Baal and Ashtarte and they built shrines in Israel. This was the way of international politics in those days. Such intermarriages strengthened trade and preserved peace. You were much less likely to invade a neighboring country if your daughter was its queen and your grandchildren's bikes were out in front of the palace.

Ahab and Jezebel built up the kingdom. The ruins of their cities and fortresses are visible to this day in Israel. One day Jezebel discovers Ahab sulking in his bed at the palace in Jezreel. The servants tell her he didn't touch his lunch and refused dinner after that.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"I'm so depressed!" Ahab whines. "Our next door neighbor Naboth won't sell me his vineyard beneath our south balcony. I want to plant a row of beans and some tomatoes, but I don't want to drive all the way out of town to do it. So I offered him a bigger piece of land in the valley, but he wouldn't take it. Said something about the land being in his family for a long, long time. But I want that vineyard. I don't know why he won't let me have it. I don't think he likes me very much." Ahab buries his head in his pillow and cries crocodile tears.

Jezebel is disgusted. "Is there a king in Israel?" she asks. "Will somebody find me a king? Can I get a king here please?"

Jezebel knows: Kings don't ask favors; they demand them. Kings don't bargain for deals; they take what they want. It's good to be the king! So Jezebel tells Ahab to get up and eat a ham sandwich and don't worry about a thing. She'll show him how it's done where she comes from. She'll get him what he wants.

So Jezebel sets Naboth up: a town picnic with good old Naboth as guest of honor, a little drinking and carousing, a sudden accusation, the emotions of the crowd, and Naboth is stoned death by an angry mob. In typical political irony, Naboth is accused of cursing God and the king by the very rulers who ignore God's laws ways.

And that is that. Naboth is gone. His land is vacant. The king gets the vineyard after all. End of story. Everybody knows how it works. The strong devour the weak. The mighty destroy the meek. The violent bear it all away. The rich abuse the poor. And the rules be damned, because the people with the money, the people with the power, the people with the clout make the rules. That's the way of the world, right? Ahab wants Naboth's field. Naboth resists. Jezebel has Naboth killed. And that's that. Might makes right. Except...

Jezebel tells Ahab, "Baby cakes, Naboth's a dead duck. Go get your vineyard." "Oh, goody!" Ahab cries, and like a little boy in a candy store, runs downstairs and out the back door to plan his vegetable garden.

But as soon as he arrives at Naboth's field he runs smack dab into Elijah, the prophet, God's mouthpiece. Elijah stands there: the way I imagine it is Elijah is just like Clint Eastwood squinting in the sun. Ahab has dealt with this guy before. He knows Elijah is about to rain on his parade.

The story says that God told Elijah to say to Ahab: "Thus says the Lord, 'Have you killed and also taken possession? In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick up your blood as well.'" Put simply, Elijah is saying that God spoke to him about Ahab's sin and sent him to speak God's word and judgment on that sin. Whew! What a story.

Now, there are many directions we could go with this story. We could use Ahab and Jezebel to talk about marriage. This was certainly a marriage of opposites. Or using some Bill Cosby humor, we could say "Your wife is not your friend."

Bill Cosby has been known to use that recurring theme throughout some of his stage performances. Of course, he illustrates "your wife is not your friend" with various stories. In one of those stories, he tells of coming home in the early hours of the morning after a long road trip. Thirty miles from home his car broke down. "Now," Cosby says, "If I call my friend at 2 in the morning and tell him my car broke down, he will say, 'OK, I'll be there right away.' But if I call my wife she will say, 'Well, why didn't you do what I said and get that car fixed?!!' This, of course, is followed by: "Your wife is not your friend." Jezebel was not Ahab's friend.

Or we could use the story to talk about doing evil. Does the evil that Ahab and Jezebel do, whether by acts of commission or omission, really bring down God's curse and punishment, or are their tragic endings the consequences of their own deplorable actions? At the end of Chapter 21 of 1 Kings, it says that

(Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the Israelites.) When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 'Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster on his house.' (1 Kings 21:25-29)

Does God really punish evil doing by bringing disaster to the next generation? Does God do that, or do evil actions have consequences for future generations? You'll have to decide.

It is not long until Ahab is killed by a random shot of an enemy arrow. The blood from his wound filled the bottom of his chariot. His body is returned to Samaria for burial. It says that "They washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria; the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed themselves in it, according to the word of the Lord that he had spoken." (1 Kings 22:38) From the writer's perspective, Ahab was an idolatrous, oppressive king who dishonored his honorable and divinely given office. Consequently, his corpse's blood is dishonored in keeping with Elijah's prophecy.

Later, Jezebel also dies a violent death. She was thrown from a window, trampled by horses, and eaten (except for her skull, feet, and palms of her hands) by dogs, all of this supposedly fulfilling the prophecy of Elijah. (2 Kings 9:33-37).

We never hear of the name Jezebel again, until it later appears in Revelation 2:20. There it is the symbolic name for a false prophet. Thus, Jezebel's name has forever come to symbolize evil.

Kofi Annan, who recently served as Secretary-General of the United Nations, says that people are not evil; only deeds are evil. And this idea would certainly be worth exploring in this text.

I have been especially thinking about that this past week. As many of you know Garrett Broughton's younger brother Ray was killed in that meth-lab explosion in Franklin a week and half ago. And to heap grief upon grief, earlier this year Ray's wife died of a drug overdose. The explosion happened in the house that Ray and his wife had rented. All of this truly a horrific series of events, the extreme result of the demons of drug addiction.

But was Ray evil? Was Ray's death a direct result of God's punishment? Was Ray wicked and cursed of God? Did Ray find himself outside of God's grace and love because of his own actions? No! Absolutely not! But his deeds were deadly! And sometimes our deeds are deadly too! His poor choices led to some unintended, horrific consequences, but consequences none-the-less. But even in the midst of all of that I am convinced that Ray was "never alone" as Emily sang earlier...that Ray was always wrapped in God's loving embrace.

So yes, we could use this text to talk about evil and suffering and in the world and God's role in it. This would certainly be worth exploring, because sometimes this evil comes a little closer to home than we might want.

But today, I want us to focus on the role of the prophet, the one who speaks for God. Who is to say to us today what the word of God is in particular situations? Shall we listen to Pat Robertson as the word of God on homosexuality? Shall we listen to Billy Graham as the word of God on what is salvation? Shall we listen to the preachers, whether on television or just down the street, as our authoritative interpretation of the Book of Revelation? Who is to be our prophet to speak for God to us?

Let's go back to the Hebrew scriptures and start with the prophets – those people so filled with the Spirit of God that they spoke for God. Moses said that he wished that all of God's people were prophets. (Numbers 11:29) Others spoke of a day when that would be so. The prophet Joel spoke for God when he said, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

In the Christian scriptures this is exactly how the story is told. The followers of Jesus were faithful Jews who knew that a prophet was one in whom the Spirit of God lives and through whom God speaks saying, "Thus says the Lord." The gospel writer Luke tells us in his book *Acts of the Apostles* that on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit of God came upon all the believers. In fact, the words of the prophet Joel, that I just quoted, are the very words cited in Peter's famous Pentecost sermon. After that, all believers were empowered to discern for themselves what is the mind and will and word of God.

Jumping ahead in history, in the seventeenth century the Baptist movement developed this theme, along with other Christian groups, including those who now make up the United Church of Christ, but it is the Baptist story that I know best. It has been called a belief in "soul competency," meaning that each individual is competent to read, understand, and interpret the Bible and discern the ways of the Spirit in the world without any authority other than the Spirit of God.

Now, I know this is hard for some of you to believe in a world where so many Baptists today are caught up in fundamentalism and biblical literalism, but it was the early Baptist movement that insisted that each conscience is free and capable of discerning good and evil; that each one of us is capable of discerning for ourselves what is the word of the Lord for our lives.

And now all the indicators suggest that the way we have been doing church and all the "authorities" we have trusted are collapsing all around us. As I mentioned in my Epiphany sermon this year, Phyllis Tickle, in her book *The Great Emergence*, points out that the church is going through one of its every-500-years-or-so rummage sales. And when the rummage sale time comes, some long held trusted authorities, some ways of doing church will have to go to make room for that new authority and that new ordering of things. And what we are seeing now is that the old authorities centered in "The church has always taught" and "The Bible says" are giving way to a new authority, that being our own personal, powerful experience of God. The way I see it, the "it seems to me" tradition seems to be on the upswing as the emerging "new" authority for a post-modern world. And I am hopeful that we in the United Church of Christ are uniquely positioned to help the wider Church live into this new reality.

Now hear me clearly: I am not saying that we should throw out the historic church; I am not saying that we should throw out the Bible all together. Far from it. We need to bring all of those witnesses...those testimonies of faith...with us as we try to discern God's voice today. I am not saying that we should not listen to each other. In fact, like those early Baptists, I am clearer than every that "soul competency" needs to be lived out in Christian community. The community of faith is always the place to test out our discernment of the Spirit in openness and honesty, without fear of rejection or retribution.

And the Baptists even left open an honorable place for those who felt they must dissent from majority opinion as their conscience dictated. We don't have to kill each other, or break fellowship with one another simply because we are not discerning God's voice in the same way. In other words, we can respectfully agree to disagree, and trust that each of us is trying our best to be faithful to God. In the end, each of us is solely responsible for discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to us, and what the Spirit of God is calling us to do; each of us is responsible for giving it our best shot, our best sense of what God is saying today.

Quite frankly, this whole notion should scare the hell out of each of us because it requires of us an engagement with the things of God that is intentional and thoughtful. It requires of us study and the best practices of spiritual discernment, like prayer, and meditation, and corporate worship. Honestly, if each of us is solely responsible for discerning the Spirit, it will require of us a lot more engagement than many of us seem to be willing to give these days. Drive-by Christianity will not do. A "be-nice-to-God" approach to religion will not be helpful. A half-baked, warm and fuzzy faith will not suffice! Not if we want to respond more passionately and courageously to God's call to love and justice; not when the Gulf of Mexico is filling with oil and our addiction to oil and fossil fuels are warming the planet.

As Annie Dillard noted:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982)

Who speaks for God today? YOU DO!

Amen.

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