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National Presbyterian Church

## **“Standing Alone With God”**

1 Kings 16-21

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In our Sunday morning sermons we're working our way through the Bible in chronological order with the help of a book called "The Story" -- it's an abbreviated introduction to the whole Bible. And we're in the middle of what call the "Old Testament," the story of God's ancient people Israel. We've come to a time when things are not good!

Last week we spoke about the disintegration of God's people Israel after the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, about 1000-900 BC. At that time, a new king by the name of Rehoboam took the throne – and became a tyrant. And because of his tyranny (his abuse of power, his lack of compassion for his people) the nation splits: the 12 tribes of Israel split; north and the south they split. Ten tribes – retaining the name Israel in the north; and two tribes Judah and Benjamin in the south used the name Judah.

And -- How easily this kind of division can happen. It almost always takes years to build up something good (almost a hundred years in the case of Kings David and Solomon). And in a few moments, often through the actions of a single leader like Rehoboam, all the built-up-good can come crashing down.

And while the split created by King Rehoboam is bad enough, what was worse was its long term impact: it became the catalyst for a rapid and significant decline in the moral and religious fiber of the nation and in the effectiveness and purpose of the nation to bear witness to God: a "spiraling down" that continued with only a few exceptions for the next 3-400 years.

And at the heart of Israel's and Judah's decline? --The people forgetting! Forgetting their constitution as a nation (in their case the Ten Commandments), so that with no foundational sense of gratitude and accountability to the God who had created them, and who had saved them from slavery, and with no sense of a universal-moral-law, all kinds of immoral behavior occurred unchecked: greed, theft, violence, sexual anarchy; the general cheapening of life and the loss of truth. So that, sadly, these things all became "the norm" – the expected order of the day."

And if in the days before Israel became an organized nation under kings David and Solomon (in the days of the Judges, as we call them) – if evil had flourished because of the sheer chaos and anarchy of the age, well, after the reigns of David and Solomon from Rehoboam on, evil NOW flourished far more because of -- the deliberate and systemic abuse of institutionalized power – political and religious – especially by the leaders: the kings, the wealthy, the priests who wielded power selfishly, often like a child playing with a toy, rather than as leaders holding their power as a sacred trust under God!

So one of the most poignant stories in the Bible about the abuse of power is a story that takes place about 50-60 years after Rehoboam splits the nation – when a man called Ahab is King, and makes a "land grab" for the vineyard of a man named Naboth. The story in 1 Kings 21:1-20, it reads like this:

1 Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.

2 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."

3 But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

4 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. {DR: like a child throwing a hissy fit}

5 His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?"

6 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.'"

7 His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? {DR: IN other words she's saying: "aren't you the one in power? Can't you use your power for whatever you want?"} . Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I'll give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

8 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. 9 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' {DR: the "big Lie"} . Then take him out, and stone him to death."

11 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, 12 they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. 13 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.

14 Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead." 15 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." 16 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.

17 THEN the word of the Lord came to (the prophet) Elijah the man from the village of Tishbe, saying: 18 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. 19 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."

20 Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, {DR: note that his words parallel Jesus: What does it profit a person, if they gain the whole world but lose their soul"} .

So here's this abuse of power -- rampant and unrepentant. To be sure, before the eras of Ahab and Rehoboam, King David had also abused his power in a similar way with Bathsheba (power is always hard to handle w/out it corrupting) but when he saw it he repented (though he still

reaped the consequences). But here with Ahab, and in the centuries that followed, the abuse of power grew more and more brazen and repentance and humility less and less frequent.

**And that was the context for God to do something new:** to raise up leaders like Elijah, leaders called “prophets,” whose job was first to be faithful to God. These people by and large were not ordained ministers or priests (some were), but devout lay believers who had a living relationship with God; people who believed that a whole invisible realm of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, existed beyond this world (if you read on in 1Kings, you’ll come to the story of Elijah being carried off to heaven in God’s chariots). BUT yet they also knew that God had laws, commandments for “this life”; and that God’s passion was for this life too . . . here and now, not just to get us to heaven, but to bring as much heaven down to earth as possible. Now.

So their second task in order to do this was to “speak truth to power.” Which often required them (like Elijah) to stand alone – in the presence of those who could hurt them. To do and say what was right – and “righteous”!

Sometimes when some people think of words like “prophet” or “prophecy” they immediately think about someone who sees into the future and tells us about what God is going to do next. And sometimes Israel’s prophets do that. But this is by no means their primary function. Far more often, the work of the prophets was actually to call the people (especially those in power) back to God; back to what God had previously said. So that their task was not so much to **foretell** the future, but To **tell forth** or **forth-tell** God’s word, God’s acts, God’s laws, God’s judgment – and to do so with power.

And this is what Elijah was doing in both our readings. At great personal cost, standing alone, confronting both Political authorities and religious authorities, Kings and Priests with their abuses. This is not an easy thing to do.

In some nations the persecution is immediate (for example, China). And even in free societies like ours, it gets complicated very quickly, especially for preachers, because people in our society have an immediate tendency to see the world through our present political system. So every statement made from the pulpit about the right and wrongs of any public issue *is seen as a partisan comment based on political allegiance, or an attack on one political party or another.*

Just for your information: In the past few years at least one or two people have left NPC because of this. For some I was too Republican. For others -- too Democrat (seems to me that getting shot at from both sides feels about right to me – my hope is to be neither!)

So let me make a distinction here that I’ve made before – and will, no doubt, make again. THE BIBLE INESCAPABLY CALLS US not just to be concerned with private ethics, but with public ethics. What the prophets call us to do is to make sure that our faith touches and transforms not just our individual lives, or the church, but leads us into the society we live in, at every level to be salt and light.

People in power need not only to be thanked for stepping into the public square, and treated with grace for an often thankless task. But we also need to hold them accountable to uphold God’s standards, whether they believe in them or not: speaking the truth; caring for those on the underside of society; not catering just to those in power; being stewards, tough not worshipers of God’s earth; and treating people of every race, class, orientation, legal status, and opinion as people made in the image of God, whether we agree with them or not. No Biblical Christian **in any political party** -- has a right to ignore these things.

BUT what the ***Bible does not spell out are specific strategies and policies for governments . . .*** how we get from here to there; how we balance and prioritize multiple issues that are all important. And from the pulpit I do not believe that that is my job either (well, at least 99 times out of 100 that is not my job: there's always an exception to every rule – think slavery, for example). BUT overall, ***political strategy is NOT the task of the church. BUT IT IS the task of individual Christian citizens of any nation, wherever possible.*** And my job, the task of the pulpit, is to shape our – your – consciences and to encourage and equip each of us to do this, as Christian citizens within a free nation, ***even if we end up on different sides of the aisle.***

And in this regard the teaching of the Prophets is essential for the shaping of our consciences. The lives and teaching of the prophets (about twenty five percent of the Bible) is essential for us to know.

Let me close with some of their words: God's words to all of us. Calling us back to God who cares passionately for us and all others! Now and forever.

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The Prophet Micah cries out like this (6:6-8)

*And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (love neighbor), and to walk humbly with your God?*

As if to say: I don't ask much of you, but this I ask: love God, love neighbor, not just in your private life (kindness), but in your public, societal and national life as well (justice).

And the Prophet Amos echoes Micah (though more sharply) in 5.21-24

*I take no delight in your solemn assemblies (says God). Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

This is one of four Biblical passages quoted by MLK, Jr. in his "dream" speech – and what Amos is saying is "I don't want your worship – I'd rather not have it at all unless you treat one another well: unless your worship leads both to both a transformed individual life and a transformed society. Indeed, in Amos 2, Amos writes sharply about the powerful and the powerless and God's laws for life, like this:

*Thus says the LORD: I will not revoke the punishment (on my people Israel); because they*

- 1. sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—*
- 2. they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,*
- 3. and push the afflicted out of the way;*
- 4. father and son go in to the same girl, so my holy name is profaned;*
- 5. they lay down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge;*
- 6. and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.*

In other words, sheer callousness towards the powerless rules the day, resulting in coveting, murder, theft, and adultery.

So society has lost its religious and moral bearings, and the prophets warn the people, that if they continue on this path, destruction awaits them: they will come under God's judgment, which will manifest itself in two different ways (in this case, the prophets are not just forth-telling, but fore-telling!)

- (1) In time, the prophets "prophecy" both nations will collapse: God will allow enemies to conquer His people, and drive them into exile.

(2) But before that, a different kind of judgment will take place, in which people who abuse others to get what they want, may indeed get what they want, but at the same time, they'll end up with nothing.

Micah says it best (6:13).

*Says God, I will make you desolate because of your sins. You shall eat, but not be satisfied . . . You shall put away, but not save . . . and what you save, I will hand over to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap. You shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.*

But that, of course, is not what God wants. What God wants is for us always to turn back to God and to heed the cry of Hosea.

In Hosea 6:1-3 – Hosea pleads

*"Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth."*

My friends: in every way possible, let us constantly, in private and in public, us use our lives to return to this God of power and grace.

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