

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Selections from I & II Kings *What's In A Name?*

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1 Kings 16:31 In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him.

I met evil when I was working as a chaplain intern in the Emergency Room of St. Vincent's Hospital in downtown Toledo, Ohio. A young man was brought in by ambulance after a severe auto accident. My job was to try and locate his next of kin. The EMT handed me the man's wallet and personal effects. I took the stack of ID and credit cards out of his wallet and began going through them on the counter of the nurse's station, looking for the name and number of a friend or relative. The doctor told me the situation was critical and there wasn't a moment to spare. However, I admit that I stopped my hurried search for a few seconds when I came across a membership card that had been filed among the others, right there between the Sam's Club Card and a Card to Gold's Gym—a membership card with this young man's picture in the upper left hand corner, a swastika in the upper right hand corner, a watermark of the confederate flag. It was a membership card for the Ku Klux Klan. I was stunned. I had no words. They actually have membership cards?!?! There, in front of me, on the counter of the nurse's desk in the emergency room of St. Vincent's Hospital—there was evil—and it had a face and a name, a birth date and social security number, and a mother waiting at home for me to call her and tell her that she must get to the hospital as soon as possible. Indeed, a mother who did not make it in time—a mother whose hate-filled son died in the trauma room just minutes after arriving at the hospital.

Evil lives among us and I admit that, on that day in the emergency room, there was a fair amount of evil living within me. I was so blinded by anger and self-righteousness that I did not want to help that young man—the evil of that membership card in his wallet sparked an evil within me, an evil that suppressed my love of, as the Prophet Micah declares, acting justly, loving kindness, and walking humbly with my God.

And that's the thing about evil, it's insidious and can spread from one person to the next like the emerald ash bore creeps north—tree to tree to tree—and before you know it entire forests are infested. Evil is contagious like that and can make even an earnest young seminarian think shocking thoughts. Evil is a powerful force. Just consider the story of Jezebel.

Now you need to know something at this point. During the month of February, I'm preaching a series of sermons that I'm calling—Naughty Girls Need Love Too—the stories of Biblical Women of Questionable Virtue. My original hypothesis was that, because of cultural and religious norms of the day, many of the women in the Bible who have been deemed by tradition as being “bad” were really misunderstood and misrepresented. I was convinced that if their stories were read through a lens of evolved thinking about women—they wouldn't appear nearly so naughty. In fact, I believed that there would be something redeemable, something good about each one and that we would be well-served to emulate something about each of these “naughty girls” in our own faith lives. Well friends, let me just tell you that when it comes to the life of Jezebel, my hypothesis is bunk. There was just nothing good about that woman. Here is her life in a nutshell.

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal who was king of the Sidonians. Ahab, king of the Israelites, married Jezebel. Now, at best this would have been an interfaith marriage as the Sidonians worshipped Ba'al and the Israelites worshipped the Lord. We might not think much of it in this day and age when most of us know of a Jew who married a Protestant or a Muslim who married a Catholic. But consider the time and the history of the Israelites—recall what was going on in their world. The conflict between the ancient Jews and Ba'al went back generations. Remember the Israelites wandering the wilderness after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. Instead of being grateful for their freedom, they began to grumble and complain, driving their poor leader Moses nuts. Naturally Moses needed breaks from all of the people's grouching and on occasion he retreated into the mountains for a little R & R, a little alone time with God. On one such occasion, Moses returned from the mountains to find that the Israelites had melted down all of their gold jewelry and house wares. Out of their gold they created the image of a calf to worship. That calf

symbolized Ba'al—a foreign deity. Instead of the Israelites turning to God—the God who had led them out of Egypt, the God who had provided them with manna in the desert, the God who only asked for their fidelity in return for which God would be their God, instead of turning to the God who had proven loyalty and compassion to them over and over and over again—when the going got tough, the Israelites got Ba'al—essentially biting the hand that fed them. But the conflict doesn't end there. The story of Jezebel begins in the Old Testament book of First Kings in the era of the kings of Israel which takes place after the Exodus. During this time the king of the northern kingdom, Israel, turned his back on God and built—you guessed it—a golden calf and ordered his people to worship it. And not just one golden calf—but two—conveniently located at opposite points on the map so as to make the worship of Ba'al more convenient for the busy Israelites of the day. Obviously the ancient Jews were having some serious problems . . . but they were only to get worse.

And boy did they ever when King Ahab, a king of the southern kingdom, Judah, came on the scene. It was that same King Ahab who married Jezebel. Ahab couldn't have made a worse choice for his wife. Yes it was scandalous when Ahab married out of the faith, but that he married the daughter of a king who promoted the worship of Ba'al—well, that was blasphemous. And after that, what ever semblance of decency or loyalty to the Lord that Ahab may have had dwindled quickly in the presence of the evil Jezebel.

Now we know that being called a Jezebel in this day and age is not a good thing. It usually holds connotations of being a hussy or a whore—an adulterous woman. But really, we're not doing Jezebel justice if we just think of her as being a hussy. Jezebel was so much more than that—she was also a liar, a cheat, and a murderer. Case in point. Her husband Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard. Ahab offered to buy the vineyard or to trade Naboth for another vineyard. Naboth said no. Ahab returned home feeling sad that he didn't get what he wanted. And seeing his sadness Jezebel asked, "Is this how you act o king over Israel? Get up and eat. Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth." And so Jezebel went to all of the most prolific

gossips in town, spreading wicked rumors about Naboth. And folks got upset and stoned him. When Jezebel received word that Naboth was dead, she said to her husband, “Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth that he refused to sell to you. He is no longer alive, but dead.” Now there’s one way to settle a property dispute.

Jezebel’s life was filled with evil that proved to be contagious and she took a lot of people down with her. In a passage in the book of First Kings her husband is remembered with the following epitaph: “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife.” Now in the end, Jezebel got a healthy dose of her own medicine when her servants killed her by throwing her out a window and, as the text explains, leaving her corpse in the street to be eaten by dogs. However, it would take generations to undo the evil she had done among the Israelites.

Now you see why my hypothesis doesn’t pan out on this story of Jezebel. She was just evil. Just pure evil. And she leaves us with the question—how do we respond to evil? It’s the question I faced that day in the emergency room, it’s the question many face on a battlefield, it’s a question we all had to struggle with in the aftermath of September 11th. How do we deal with evil, how do we protect ourselves from evil, without resorting to evil ourselves?

There’s no easy answer for dealing with that which is evil, especially if the evil is within a person. However, there is a prescriptive that can help us avoid evil, that can keep us from fighting evil with evil. It is a mantra that I spoke to myself that day in the emergency room, a mantra I repeated on the 11th day of September in 2001 when I watched airplanes crash into buildings, a mantra I repeat constantly when I am tempted to resort to evil. Dick read the mantra this morning . . . act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Act justly . . . in the words of an Old Testament scholar, “work for fairness and equality for all, particularly the weak and the powerless who are exploited by others. . . .”

Love mercy . . . “related to the Hebrew word hesed “[whose] meaning can hardly be conveyed by any single English word. It has to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness. It is not enough to be faithful, we are to love God.” And finally, walk humbly with your God . . . “The key word here is walk. We are to walk with God, careful to put God first and to live in conformity with God’s will. Our life pilgrimage is likened to a walk with God as our constant companion. These key verses from Micah are about life-style, one’s total outlook on life, and one’s ethical values.”¹

Obviously Jezebel had no regard for justice, mercy, or humility. Ancient Christian Crusaders who went into the Holy Land on killing sprees and sought to rule foreign lands that were not theirs had no regard for justice, mercy, or humility. Hitler and Mussolini and other dictators like them have no regard for justice, mercy, or humility. Men who fly airplanes into buildings and kill innocents have no regard for justice, mercy, or humility. They are all corrupted by evil because evil knows no bounds of religion, race, or creed, it is not the agent of any one group. Evil just is.

Carl Barth, a famous Christian theologian of the twentieth century considered “evil an alien power of ‘nothingness’ that arises mysteriously from what God does not will in the act of creation . . . It is that which contradicts the will of God . . .”² Jezebel, and other folks of evil, contradict the will of God—that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. In the absence of justice, mercy, and love the tendrils of evil can reach into a soul and fill it with a “nothingness”, a nothingness of God, there’s nothing of God there.

It is my prayer that we would all be filled with the “somethingness” of God. That we would be filled with the justice, mercy, and humility of walking with God. For then and only then

¹ Daniel J. Simundson, *New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. VII, 580

² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 110.

will we begin to be able to reject the evils of this world and embrace the justice, mercy, and love of God's realm.

Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you God.