**SERMON SERIES: WILD, WICKED, AND WONDERFUL WOMEN OF THE BIBLE**

**“The Most Ruthless Woman In The Bible”**

***1st Kings 21:1-16***

Throughout this month we’ve been focusing on some lesser-known women in the Bible in our sermon series “Wild, Wicked, And Wonderful Women Of The Bible.” We’ve looked at the unnamed widow who fed Elijah. We’ve looked at Hagar, an abused surrogate mother who gave God a name. We’ve explored an unnamed, sinful woman in the gospel of Luke who teaches us a thing or two about worship. And last Sunday we revisited the story of Rahab, a prostitute who did not let her past define her future. She stands as an example of how God is always working in people around us, and how faith that is demonstrated and lived out is the faith that people remember. Let’s turn to our Scripture reading, 1st Kings 21:1-16, for this final message in our series.

***Call them what you will—“Queen Bee,” “Drama Mama,” a diva—at points and times in our lives we have all*** ***known a woman who had to have complete and total control. She had to be the center of attention. She was a woman who might be admired from*** ***a distance for her strength of character or determination, but*** ***whom you did NOT want to cross!*** Today’s woman has been referred to as “the Lady Macbeth of the Bible.” Her name was Jezebel…

*Now there was a man named Naboth, from Jezreel, who owned a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. 2One day Ahab said to Naboth, “Since your vineyard is so convenient to my palace, I would like to buy it to use as a vegetable garden. I will give you a better vineyard in exchange, or if you prefer, I will pay you for it.”*

*3But Naboth replied, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance that was passed down by my ancestors.”*

*4So Ahab went home angry and sullen because of Naboth’s answer. The king went to bed with his face to the wall and refused to eat!*

*5“What’s the matter?” his wife Jezebel asked him. “What’s made you so upset that you’re not eating?”*

*6“I asked Naboth to sell me his vineyard or trade it, but he refused!” Ahab told her.*

*7“Are you the king of Israel or not?” Jezebel demanded. “Get up and eat something, and don’t worry about it. I’ll get you Naboth’s vineyard!”*

*8So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, sealed them with his seal, and sent them to the elders and other leaders of the town where Naboth lived. 9In her letters she commanded: “Call the citizens together for a time of fasting, and give Naboth a place of honor. 10And then seat two scoundrels across from him who will accuse him of cursing God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.”*

*11So the elders and other town leaders followed the instructions Jezebel had written in the letters. 12They called for a fast and put Naboth at a prominent place before the people. 13Then the two scoundrels came and sat down across from him. And they accused Naboth before all the people, saying, “He cursed God and the king.” So he was dragged outside the town and stoned to death. 14The town leaders then sent word to Jezebel, “Naboth has been stoned to death.”*

*15When Jezebel heard the news, she said to Ahab, “You know the vineyard Naboth wouldn’t sell you? Well, you can have it now! He’s dead!” 16So Ahab immediately went down to the vineyard of Naboth to claim it.*

Jezebel was born in Phoenicia, in what is now modern-day Lebanon and Syria. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king. Her father’s name contained the name Baal, the fertility god, and Jezebel was a priestess in the cult of Baal. Her marriage to Ahab, king of Israel, was purely for political reasons--it was an alliance between Israel and Phoenicia.

Jezebel had grown up with privilege, position, and power. She had learned how to be manipulative, controlling, and deceptive. And she used all these--and more-- in her role as queen of Israel.

In 1st Kings 18:4, Jezebel was responsible for killing off the prophets of the Lord. She was determined to do away with the worship of God and replace it with the worship of Baal. Then in 1st Kings 19, she terrorized the prophet Elijah after God had defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Jezebel was fully and completely in control, pressing her evil influence throughout the courts of Israel. She was a woman who was used to getting her way, to not being crossed, and to ruling with an iron fist.

In today’s Scripture reading we find an example of the ruthlessness and cunning of Jezebel. It began this way: *Now there was a man named Naboth, from Jezreel, who owned a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. 2One day Ahab said to Naboth, “Since your vineyard is so convenient to my palace, I would like to buy it to use as a vegetable garden. I will give you a better vineyard in exchange, or if you prefer, I will pay you for it.”*

*3But Naboth replied, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance that was passed down by my ancestors.”*

King Ahab had his beady little eyes set on a choice piece of land near his palace that belonged to an influential fellow named Naboth. Ahab made Naboth an offer: the king would exchange a piece of his land for Naboth’s vineyard, or he was willing to buy it from him. But Naboth replied that the vineyard was part of his ancestral land, and as such, he could not part with it, not even for a better plot of land or sum of money. What Naboth did was perfectly in keeping with the laws of Israel regarding ownership of land.

***History has described Ahab as “uncouth, crabby, and often cowardly.”*** So in verse four: *4…Ahab went home angry and sullen because of Naboth’s answer. The king went to bed with his face to the wall and refused to eat!* In other words, he pouted and acted like a four-year-old.

Enter Jezebel: *5“What’s the matter?” his wife Jezebel asked him. “What’s made you so upset that you’re not eating?”* Can’t you just see her standing there in her regal gown, hands on her hips, dark eyes glaring, red lips curled in a sneer? She had surely seen Ahab’s pity parties before, so she responded, *7“Are you the king of Israel or not?” Jezebel demanded. “Get up and eat something, and don’t worry about it. I’ll get you Naboth’s vineyard!”*

As we’ve said, Jezebel was a princess from the royal family of the king of Phoenicia. All her life she had seen her father take whatever he wanted. But her husband, Ahab, was accepting the right of the private citizen to refuse to part with his personal property. Ahab knew he was bound by the law of Moses, that Naboth was perfectly within his right not to part with his ancestral land. But Jezebel never gave allegiance to the Lord or followed God’s law, and in her experience and expectation, kings should take whatever they wanted.

So Jezebel set a devious plan into action: *8So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, sealed them with his seal, and sent them to the elders and other leaders of the town where Naboth lived. 9In her letters she commanded: “Call the citizens together for a time of fasting, and give Naboth a place of honor. 10And then seat two scoundrels across from him who will accuse him of cursing God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.”*

Jezebel deceptively drew the leading officials into a murder plot. She knew if she could kill off Naboth, his land would revert to the state and Ahab could have his coveted garden spot.

Notice how she used the pretense of legal form—Ahab’s signature, an official seal, a fast day (normally reserved for times of civic crisis). She secured the assistance of two (false) witnesses, again just as the law required--her craftiness was on full display.

As we know, her plan succeeded. In fact, verses 11-14 are an exact replay of what we read in verses 8-10, indicating that Jezebel’s instructions were followed to the letter. Everyone knew that you didn’t dare cross Jezebel. Master manipulator, power-crazed monarch, domineering woman, spoiled queen, murderous villain, priestess of a pagan cult that celebrated temple prostitution, sexual immorality, and even child sacrifices: that was Jezebel. And we remember her story because even the worst woman in the Bible can teach us a few things…

The first thing Jezebel teaches us is that **the more power you have, the more accountability you need. *Lord Acton, the English historian, is famous for the quote, “Power* *corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*** This was exemplified in Jezebel. Her power over Ahab and Israelwas absolute: there was no one to question her, to challenge her,to hold her accountable.

Regardless of what power we mayhave—in the home, over our children, as a teacher, in thefinancial world, in the church—we are accountable for how weuse that power. A Christian worldview sees allpower and authority is given to us by God, therefore we mustanswer to him for how we use that power. When there is no one to do this, we end up withpeople like Adolph Hitler, Jezebel, or anyone else who acts with impunity.

Second, Jezebel teaches us that **our desire for control can easily get out-of-control.** As human beings, in organized social structures,there is always control of some form. It is necessary for ourability to function and live effectively. Unfortunately, when weget a taste of being in control, we very often find ourselvesexercising that control in ways that benefit us or our particular group. ***Nowhere is this more evident than in* *our political party system: the more control politicians have* *over things, the more they want and demand.*** But it isn’t just theD.C. insiders—we all seek to exercise control over people, events,or organizations to get our own way. The church is one of theprimary places where control is abused. It may be from a dominantJezebel-like person, from a group or committee, a class, or apastor. Because we are not perfect and because we continue tosin, our hunger to be in charge and to call all the shots can get usin a lot of trouble.

***Perhaps you’ve heard of something called a “Jezebel spirit?” It refers to a manipulative, domineering dark spirit of control in churches.*** ***In one appointment I served there was a strong*** ***Jezebel spirit in the church. A* *small group of ladies had almost total control over the church.* *Very little, if anything, could be done without their approval. They did not have a Christ-like attitude and as a result, the church* *was extremely dysfunctional. That oppressive spirit of control* *had to be broken, and thank God, he did break it! Every one of* *those women left the church after being stripped of their control.***

And third, Jezebel teaches us that **no matter how pretty the outside is,** **an ugly attitude will still shine through.** We are told in 2nd Kings9:30that just before Jezebel died*…she painted her eyelids and fixed her hair…* A true diva to the end, she was going out looking her best. And she did go out: straight out the window as she was thrown to her death. ***It’s from her pre-death primping that we get the cultural expression of “being painted up like a Jezebel”***

But no amount of cosmetics could cover up the ugliness in Jezebel’s heart. What was in her heart and spirit was who she truly was. We may try to put on a good act and appear our best, but the truth of the matter is that what’s in our heart will always make itself known. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said, *“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”* If we are greedy in our heart, it will be known in our words and deeds. If we are bigoted, it will be heard in our language. If we are judgmental, people will know--regardless of what kind of public appearance we may put on.

But there is one aspect of Jezebel’s story that is true of every single one of us, without exception. No matter who we are—no matter how much we have accumulated in our life—no matter how much good or bad we’ve done—we will all face death one day. It’s an unfortunate part of the human condition, but it is part of it nonetheless. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow, nor even this afternoon for that matter. Scripture instructs us *4“…remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is. 5You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand. My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath.”*

***I recently asked someone who’d just visited their doctor how the appointment had gone. The person replied with a smile, “It went well and I got a good report. But it’s terminal.”*** It was a recognition and acknowledgement that our human condition ends only one way. This flesh and blood body will one day fail. But as Christians, we do not dwell upon the end of life because we know that the end of this earthly existence becomes the beginning of a new heavenly existence. Paul wrote in 1st Thessalonians 4:13, *13And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.* Christians grieve just like everyone else on this planet. But we know our grief is tempered by the promises of Jesus Christ and the resurrection life he bestows.

On this Sunday before Memorial Day--when we pause to remember those who have given their lives for our country--let us also pause now to remember those who have departed from this congregation of faith. I invite you to join me in the Time of Remembrance on your bulletin insert…