

# Measure for Measure

I Kings 21:1-14, 16

By

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June 13, 2010

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

In a few weeks, the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA will gather in Minneapolis, Minnesota to conduct the business of the church and discern God's will for the future. You will no doubt hear news reports of the activities and decisions of the Assembly, especially the week following the Fourth of July. Just a word of caution: don't believe everything you read and hear. Reporters often don't understand our way of being church together. We discuss issues extensively and sometimes even argue with one another. Some ideas have a short life and others are distilled sometimes through a laborious committee process that may even require more than one General Assembly before becoming part of the Church's life. Reporters look for shock value and don't understand when an idea is in the process.

For example, the General Assemblies of 1980 and 1983 directed that a hymnal be developed, "using inclusive language and sensitive to the diverse nature" of the church. Eighteen people were selected to serve on the committee and they began their work in April of 1985, concluding their selection process in July 1989. It took four years to complete the decision-making process. When you work through committees, the process is often lengthy but hopefully results in the best thinking rising to the surface rather than one individual's inspiration at the moment. By the way, another hymnal committee is now at work developing yet a new hymnal for the church.

One of the discussions of the earlier committee involved whether to include the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers," a favorite of many through the years, especially late nineteenth and early twentieth century. You may recall the first verse, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war . . ." After some deliberation it was determined to be too militaristic and dropped from consideration. After two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam, American culture was in a different place by the 1980's. The decision was made to include other hymns that were more inclusive and less violent, reflecting our faith through something other than battle imagery.

But then there is the Old Testament! Plenty of battles and lots of bloody stories can be found there. And there is judgment from God for wrongdoing in such detail that it hardly seems appropriate for Christian worship. Sin and greed motivate power misused for self-advancement in human affairs. God intervenes to establish (or re-establish) justice. I'm sometimes surprised at the timelessness of the stories of the Bible. The same moral dilemmas faced by those who lived thousands of years ago exist today in one form or another. And God is on the side of

justice still! Those who fail to understand that and mistakenly believe that God has blessed them in order to bless themselves, rather than others, inevitably plant the seeds of their own undoing. "Pride goes before destruction"<sup>1</sup> writes the author of Proverbs.

We may prefer not to use battle imagery in our hymns but the message of the Bible is that if you intend to pursue the life of faith, you're in for a fight! Because there is a battle raging between the ideals of the Creator and the reality of human existence. That battle exists not only in society but even within us.

So in I Kings we find the story of Naboth's vineyard. It is a moral tale, a cautionary story used to back up some important ethical instruction. It is a story of "eminent domain" – property seized by one powerful enough to take what he wanted at the expense of one who had little else than his family inheritance of land. The message seems to be that those who pervert justice for their own ends and who oppress a weaker neighbor will end up caught in their own trap, because God is on the side of justice. God even brings down kings who act unjustly. Those who greedily use their position of power and influence to harm the defenseless for the purpose of increasing their own wealth will pay a price one day. Centuries later Jesus put it this way, "the measure you give will be the measure you receive."<sup>2</sup> That is precisely what happens to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, for their treachery and violation of the law. They become victims of the very outcome they brought upon Naboth. Naboth would not sell his inheritance as an act of faithfulness to God and the covenant – it was not an economical decision. Ahab, on the other hand, sold himself to gain advantage over another because of his greed, and paid the consequences.

There is one standard applied equally to all, including the king. A violation of the law, codified in the Ten Commandments; "thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal, thou shall not bear false witness, thou shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor" will result in the judgment of God, who is on the side of justice and those who are powerless in the world. What more relevant message can there be today? The movie Robin Hood plays on this theme of justice. Those in power are supposed to use their position of influence for the sake of all. When they misuse their power for their own purposes, justice will come upon them. In economics, the Bernie Madoffs will have a day of reckoning. In politics the Eliot Spitzers, who make a living by exposing corruption are themselves exposed when they violate the same laws. Watergate, Monica Lewinsky, and "off-mic" comments about Barbara Boxer's hair just have a way of being exposed. In sports, NCAA violations for self-advancement of athletes, coaches, teams, and winning programs threaten to erode confidence and faith in our schools and their leadership. Even churches must face up to the scandal of clerics who use their authority and respect in the community to meet their own sexual needs at the expense

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 16:18

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:38

of children. There is one standard to which all are measured. God is not unaware and will not remain uninvolved in readdressing injustice.

The Church is called to a prophetic role in society, holding up the high standards to which we are all called by God. If you intend to live the life of faith, you're in for a fight in the world. I recently saw a bumper sticker that read, "Break with convention, keep the commandments." That is the message of the story of Naboth's vineyard. The question is who are the Ahabs and Jezebels today? And the point is: don't sell yourself for some temporary triumph or some momentary acquisition.

In a period of relativism, some universal moral standards still exist. I remember a story about a man who entered the music studio of a friend one morning and asked, "What is the good word for today?" The musician walked over to a little triangle suspended from the ceiling and picked up an instrument, striking the triangle, which then reverberated with sound that filled the room. He said, "That is middle C! It was C in the past and it will be C in the future. That is the good word for today."

On this choir appreciation Sunday, we celebrate God's standards for us all, and we celebrate the high standards for musical excellence to which our choirs and instrumentalists aspire. We remember that we too are called to high standards and excellence; to faithfulness to the covenant with God and to behaviors in line with the commandments of the Lord. "What does the Lord require of us?" asks the prophet Micah. "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God,"<sup>3</sup>

Thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord – for he has shown us the way. Amen

*Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*

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<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:8