1 Kings 21:1-19

“The High Cost of Real-Estate”

I was reminiscing recently with Terry, and the Perrotts, while at Boston Pizza for our fundraising event, that kids can be cruel with names and nicknames. So much so that my mother always claimed that she strived hard to find names for her children that were difficult to rhyme. Gee, Darrell doesn’t rhyme with anything, like barrel does it? My sister Kelli had it far worse with nicknames ranging from belly to smelly. Mom maybe didn’t achieve her goal entirely.

When I was a young kid attending James Hillier school in Brantford, we immature kids got a great deal of mileage in our giggling over our teachers’ name. James Hillier school seemed to have a few unusual names with double meaning. In Grade three we had Mrs. Harriman and grade four Miss Terrdick. Our school nurse at the time was Miss Snodgrass. And our principal Mr. Little was a really a very big man.

There is nothing inherently wrong with these surnames, its just as I mentioned, they carry with them a double entendre or double meaning. So I began to wonder what some of the most unusual real names people carry. Many of them have double meanings I cannot repeat in polite company, and most of them have me scratching my head wondering what in the world were the parents thinking. So, a quick internet search found the following unusual names.

These are actual, real, legal names for people living today. One young woman was named by her loving parents “Marijuana Pepsi Jackson”. I found a kindergartner teacher named of all things Mrs. Rape. There is a man in Singapore named “Batman Bin Suparman”. Others I found were Chris P. Bacon, Wendy Wacko, Oliver loser, Bud Light, Tahra Dactyl, Filet Minyon and my personal favourite, Jed I Knight.

I even found two couples who unadvisedly decided to hyphenate their names. One was MacDonald-Berger and the other Hardy-Harr. Names are very important, and a great deal of care needs to be expended when naming anyone. Most Ontario residents don’t realize that the Registrar General of the province can, and has on many occasions, rejected names suggested for newborns. Either because they are silly, offensive, or nonsensical.

Then there are names that have seemed to have fallen out of common usage over time. I never hear of a newborn receiving my grandmother’s name Gertrude anymore. I rarely hear the names Ethel, Bertha, Ruth: anymore. And have you noticed how you dislike certain names, or would never choose them for your children because of a bad experience with someone who has that name?

Then there are names we simply never use because there was once an infamous person linked to the name. I rarely run into someone named Adolf as in Hitler, or Benito as in Mussolini. I did on the internet though and found someone in Argentina whose legal name was Hitler Mussolini. That just seems cruel to me.

One such name you never hear for a newborn baby girl is Jezebel. It’s actually worse than simply a name discarded, because the name Jezebel has become synonymous with a woman who is manipulative, evil, or just plain nasty. The name Jezebel has become an adjective. In other words, “She is a Jezebel”. To be called a “Jezebel” is never a good thing, and most, if not all women, would be deeply offended to be referred to as a Jezebel. So, how in the world did one name become so maligned and shunned?

It all begins with a real-estate deal gone horribly wrong. You think we have real-estate issues in Toronto, wait until you hear this sordid tale. There once was a man named Naboth who owned a very nice vineyard. From what transpired, we can assume that this vineyard was very desirable. It was likely very fertile, well tended, and clearly Naboth took a great deal of pride in the vineyard. It was a choice piece of territory.

But as we know in real-estate, its value really lies in: location, location, location, and Naboth’s vineyard was in an unfortunate location; at least for him and his family. This particular vineyard was located right next to the summer palace of the King of Israel who was named Ahab. Ahab coveted this piece of land, because he wanted it for a vegetable garden. Not because he ever picked up a hoe to work the ground himself; he had people for that.

But probably because it was so conveniently located to the palace. Ahab wanted easy access to very fresh veggies and herbs. Location, location, location. So Ahab went to Naboth and offered him money, or another choice piece of land, in exchange for the vineyard. Seems like a reasonable thing to do to us. You see a parcel of land, or a house you want, and you make an offer. But remember this is not Toronto, and this is a completely different culture.

Naboth refused the offer, not as a negotiating tactic, but because this parcel of land had been handed down from generation to generation in his family. One thing that is often missed in this story is Ahab’s failure to remember, or at least honour, the fact that in Mosaic law, the sale of ancestral land was forbidden, for any price. The whole concept of redemption comes from the concept of buying back ancestral land. Naboth was therefore an honourable, god fearing man.

A strong thread running through this story is that of the importance of land, and our historical connection to it. In many cultures around the world, land is tightly connected to identity. Ahab’s reaction to Naboth’s refusal to sell, is meant to be seen by the reader as one of a sulking child, akin to someone not getting a cookie. He went to his room, laid down, refused to eat, and pouted up a storm. He was miserable and made everyone else miserable.

Enter Jezebel, the king’s wife. A woman who made Delilah look like Mother Theresa. Jezebel was not an Israelite, nor a Jew, she was a pagan, who worshipped Baal the Canaanite fertility god. Jezebel was a Phoenician princess born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Her marriage to Ahab was not one of love, but strictly a business transaction, a political arrangement. Her personal goal as the new queen of Israel, was to end all worship of Jehovah or God.

In fact, her life was practically consumed in the promotion of the worship of Baal.

At one point she was known to have accumulated, and supported 450 priests, and 400 priestesses of foreign gods in dozens of worship centers, or as they are often referred to in the bible as the “High Places”. This was because temples to pagan gods were often built on mountain tops. Baal worship was particularly nasty, because it included temple prostitution, and even the sacrificing of children. Baal worshippers figured these practices increased fertility.

In 1 Kings 18 we read that Jezebel undertook to kill off all the prophets of God. She was the one who responded to the result of the contest on Mount Carmel with Elijah. After which Jezebel made it her mission in life to hunt down Elijah and kill him. Now, as evil as Jezebel was, she never, ever, claimed allegiance to the God of Israel. She despised God, and did everything she could to undermine any devotion by the people to God.

Ahab however, had abandoned God, and followed the idol worship of his wife. Probably to keep Jezebel happy. There was no greater treachery the king of Israel could undertake, than to turn their back on God. But Israelite and Judean kings did so numerous times, which led ultimately to Israel’s destruction and Judah’s exile. We need to remember that even though Jezebel orchestrated the great evil over Naboth’s vineyard, the blame really rests with Ahab who abandoned his faith and principles.

This awful tragedy takes its ugly turn, when Jezebel sees Ahab in his room pouting, and asks what is wrong, and he gives her his frivolous tale of disappointment. Now Jezebel, does not simply express sympathy to Ahab, instead, her mind starts turning over solutions to the problem. The first thing she does is she emasculates him. She belittles him. In today’s language she calls him a wimp, a poor king, and a poor man. She tells him to “man up”.

“Aren’t you the king?” she says. What’s the point of being a king if you can’t use your power once in a while to get your own way? Ahab is a bit of a wimp. He is an overindulged man. However at least he did not try and cheat or manipulate Naboth. Jezebel had no such qualms. She tells Ahab not to worry, because she has a plan; an awful evil plan. This moment reminds me of a scene in the animated Christmas program, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas”.

The Grinch wants to end Christmas, and struggles to figure out how; and then he gets an idea; an awful idea, and gets this great wide sinister grin with his lips curling up on the ends. Jezebel grins and then rushes off to writes letters, and sent them to the nobles to command them to hold a fast, and place Naboth in the place of honour. In other words, lots and lots of witnesses. A fast, a religious exercise, suggested by Jezebel the queen of paganism.

Then in the midst of the religious, public fast, two sons of Belial, are to come forward and claim they heard Naboth blaspheme God and the king. It was evil in its shrewdness. Mosaic law required two witnesses to verify any charge against a person, especially such a grievous charge as blasphemy. Remember when witnesses were procured to testify against Jesus, but they couldn’t get their stories straight?

This fast ordered in the king’s name, is a religious celebration, and the people present would not tolerate any slight towards God, or the king who called for the fast. Jezebel, remember, had sent the letter in the name of the king, and with his seal. Jezebel knew what the penalty would be for Naboth, with the crowd in a religious frenzy. Not that Jezebel cared one wit about blaspheming God, as she blasphemed him regularly. The plan was carried out and the two men bore false witness against Naboth, and he was dragged out of the city, and stoned to death.

As awful as this event is, the story gets even worse, but we do not learn the full extent of the evil until 2 Kings 9, where we read that the sons of Naboth, the rightful heirs to the vineyard were also killed. No loose ends. All this shedding of Naboth’s family’s blood, meant there were no rightful heirs to the land, and so the much coveted vineyard reverted to the crown.

Ahab got his vegetable garden with the price of innocent blood. When Ahab learned of the death of Naboth, and his sons, he does not mourn for his neighbour. Instead, Ahab jumps on his chariot, and rides out to the vineyard. Can you imagine the grieving widow of Naboth, and mother of Naboth’s sons seeing the king arrive all giddy with excitement? She lost everything to a pathetic man who wanted to grow herbs.

The vileness of this story cannot be overstated. Ahab as a king had access to hundreds of acres of land. In fact, he had many homes, and he ruled a whole land. Yet it was not enough. It’s a pattern we have seen before in King David, who had several wives, but chose to commit adultery with Bathsheba. God says to David in 2 Samuel 12:8, “I gave you your Master’s house; and your Master’s wives, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given you much more.”

It is pretty clear that Jezebel and Ahab knew what they were doing. They just didn’t care. They did not fear God or any laws, religious or civil, or even public opinion. They knew what they were doing was sinful, evil even, yet went ahead anyway. They believed they were above the law, or a law unto themselves. They believed that integrity was not a prerequisite of being a king. Ahab also, clearly believed it was better to keep Jezebel happy, than to honour his own people and his own faith. Thus the time of Ahab’s rule ends up being one of the darkest periods of time in Israel’s history.

Later on Elijah mourns to God that he is the last prophet of God in the land, that there is no one left. Darkness is a great metaphor for sin. We all know what it is like to enter a dark room or turn off the lights in a room. For a while we feel almost blind. If we are not careful we can trip over unseen hazards. But over time our eyes adjust, and although things are not perfectly clear we can begin to navigate and function in the darkness.

That’s how sin works. We can, over time, get used to it. Over time we are tempted to water down wickedness, or reclassify it so it is more palatable to society in general. The darkness can be so bad at times, that we are no longer surprised or outraged by the things we hear. What is of primary concern here is not the natural world.

What should concern us in the story of this great travesty of real-estate, is who is in charge. Because of Jezebel’s great evil, Ahab dies a nasty death within two years of gaining the vineyard. Her son Ahaziah the new king, dies young. Through a great deal of political maneuvering, Jehu is appointed the new king of Israel, instead of Joram another son of Jezebel. To bring stability to the realm, Jehu seeks out Joram in 2 Kings 9:22.

There we read, “Have you come in peace, Jehu?’ ‘How can there be peace,” Jehu replied, “As long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of your mother Jezebel prevailed.’” Eventually, if we read the whole story of Jezebel, she meets an ugly end. An end prophesied by Elijah. Jezebel dolls herself up to make nice for the new king Jehu, but Jezebel is hated by everyone so much that her own eunuchs, at Jehu’s urging, push her out her window to her death.

Jehu after witnessing this is so unbothered by it, he actually goes inside the palace to have a meal, before deciding what to do with Jezebel’s remains. Ahab and Jezebel’s story is a warning in bright red letters. You cannot mock God. Eventually the consequences of our manipulative evil will find us out. This is all so tragic and unnecessary.

Jezebel had everything going for her. She had every opportunity for greatness, but she could not humble herself. Whenever we think we know what is best, and our way is the best way, we are groping in the dark. Even the smallest infraction against God can leave a very bad smell. In Leadership Magazine in 1983 there appeared a story about a man who wanted to sell his house in Haiti for $2000. Another man wanted to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn’t afford the full price.

After much bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the original price with one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from over the front door which the new owner could never remove. After several years, the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the nail he owned.

Soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail. The moral of the story is simple. “If we leave just one peg on which sin or evil can hang its rotting garbage on, our whole lives become unfit for Christ’s habitation.” Evil leaves a rotting stench, that: taints our lives, relationships and even our names.

Like Jezebel, if we are no respecter of God, then we become a law unto ourselves. Instead of loving our neighbours as ourselves, we seek to manipulate or exploit them for our own gain. And then no one wants to hear our name, nor the name of Jesus who we claim to represent.