

"Ahab - Worse Than All Who Preceded Him!"

1 Kings 16:19-34
August 23, 2009

1 Kings 22:1-28
St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

When Ahab became the King of Israel, he ruled for twenty two years. We're told in our text from 1 Kings 16 that "he sinned against the Lord more than any of his predecessors.... He did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, than all the kings of Israel before him."

Ahab built quite a reputation for being bad! While Israel had had some wonderful kings, they also had had some really rotten kings. It wasn't easy to be the worst, but Ahab achieved that distinction.

Right before Ahab was Omri who had led the people into sin and idolatry. Omri became king by capturing the city where King Zimri was. Now Zimri was no saint himself, having become king by assassinating King Elah. Zimri only ruled for 7 days, but in that time he killed all of the male descendants of the former King Baasha. The list goes on from Baasha to Nadab, to Benhadad, etc.. One was worse than the other, and as 1 Kings notes, all of them sinned against God and let the people of Israel into sin, but Ahab was the worst of all.

After the death of Solomon, Israel broke into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, or Judah. The Northern Kingdom had one rotten ruler after another, beginning with Jeroboam who intentionally turned away from God, making calves of gold - very much like the Israelites did when Moses went up on the mountain to receive the 10 commandments, except that they did it in fear, while Jeroboam did it to make himself great. There in Bethel on an altar built to God, he offered sacrifices to the golden calves that he had made. Jeroboam created a religion which he controlled, choosing whomever he wanted to serve as a priest to these golden calves that he had made.

But Jeroboam, Omri, Zimri, Baasha, and company could not hold a candle to Ahab. He was the baddest of the bad. He was the worst king that Israel had ever had!

Why was that the case? What made him the very worst? Certainly there was no lack of competition, so he had to do extraordinarily bad things to be the very worst king that Israel had ever had.

One of the charges against Ahab was that he married Jezebel, who had Naboth falsely accused and killed so that she and Ahab could take over his vineyard for a garden. She had no scruples about doing whatever was needed to get something that she wanted. Jezebel never asked what was right and what was wrong, only what it was that she wanted. One of Ahab's mistakes was marrying someone who had no commitment to justice, to truth, to doing what was right. A second

mistake was that Ahab quite willingly went along with Jezebel's ideas and schemes. For example, he knew what was going on with Naboth, but he never challenged her or question her actions.

But even more than that, Ahab was evil in his own right. Ahab built a temple to Baal in Samaria, and put up an image the goddess Asherah, who Jezebel's father had served as a priest. Here was the king of Israel - a nation supposedly dedicated to serving God, a people who saw themselves as God's chosen people, a people who defined themselves and their history through all of the previous generations, they defined themselves in relationship to God - and Ahab their king modeled a behavior that said, it's okay to worship other gods.

To say it another way, Ahab knew that the Israelite people could be seduced by the worship of false gods. It had happened before many times in their history - each time with disastrous results. Time after time, the lessons of their history said that only bad can come from turning away from God, and now Ahab was intentionally leading them away from God again.

As their leader he had a responsibility to give them good leadership. He had a responsibility to look out for their best interests, and to act in ways that not only fulfilled his own needs, but that were good for the people. Instead, Ahab did whatever he wanted, not worrying about the consequences of his actions - either for himself or for the people of Israel.

In fact, we're told that Ahab had succumbed to the temptation that is always present for powerful leaders. They don't want to hear bad news. They want all of their plans to work out the way that they hope. So the temptation both then and now was for their advisors to tell the king what he wanted to hear. They didn't want to be responsible for being the bearer of bad news, so they would only give good news.

That would seem to be part of what happened with the 400 prophets when they were consulted by Ahab. Now it's very seldom that you get 400 people to be in complete agreement about anything, but in this case all 400 agreed that the king would win a wonderful victory against Damascus if he attacked.

Jehoshaphat, who was the king of Judah was not comfortable with those results. Jehoshaphat was being asked to lead the armies of Judah into battle with the armies of the Northern Kingdom. Jehoshaphat was a king who sought to be faithful to God, to do what was right, and he knew that God's will is usually difficult enough to understand and to interpret so that 400 prophets would not be in complete agreement. He suspected that something was wrong, and so he asked for a second opinion.

Isn't there someone else we can consult? Ahab replied that there was one more prophet - Micaiah, and then said, "But I hate him because he never prophesies anything good for me; it's always something bad." Ahab did not want to hear bad news. He only wanted to be told that good things would happen to him.

The two kings summon Micaiah at the insistence of Jehoshaphat, and this

atmosphere of telling the king only what he wants to hear has so pervaded the court that the official who brought Micaiah tells him on the way that all the other prophets have prophesied success for the king, and so he'd better do the same.

But, as he always did, Micaiah spoke what he believed to be the truth. He tells the kings that they will be defeated if they go forth into battle, and that Ahab will be killed. Then Micaiah describes a vision of the angels in heaven planning with God to deceive Ahab so that he will go out and get himself killed in battle. Ahab of course is outraged by the prophecies of Micaiah and has him thrown into prison until his safe return, to which Micaiah replies that if the king returns safely, then God has not been speaking through him.

“What can we learn from all of this? What can we discover about Ahab that will help us as we work at living our own lives?”

Ahab was the worst king that Israel had ever had. He was the worst because he led people away from God. He was the worst because he listened to and encouraged the evil of his wife Jezebel. He was the worst because he didn't want to know the truth, he only wanted to hear voices that agreed with him and what he wanted. But most of all, Ahab became the worst king that Israel had ever had because he failed to trust in God. He was out to serve himself rather than to serve God, and it showed.

Of all the lessons that we can learn from Ahab, that one is the most important. For when we sincerely try to serve God, we can and will make mistakes along the way, but as long as our intentions are good, we will be like Jehoshaphat - wanting to hear from the Micaiah's of the world and suspicious of the plans of the evil. It is only when we become like Ahab, turning our back on God and seeking to serve only ourselves, it is only then when true evil takes hold.

If we learn nothing else from Ahab, let us learn that the source of life and security is God and God alone. When we turn our backs on God, then we also turn our backs on who we are, and who we are created to be.

Amen.