

Sunday, June 16, 2013: 1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14), 15-21a; 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue

"Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful," Jezebel said to Ahab. "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." Using letters with forged signatures, she commanded leaders to dispatch thugs to murder Naboth. Meanwhile Ahab feasted. He trusted Jezebel to give him his heart's desire. Jezebel killed without having to see her victim, and Ahab benefited without knowing about the plot.

This is a story about engaging in violence while staying far away from the conflict zone, murdering enemies without having to watch them die. Our world echoes the world of Ahab and Jezebel. In theirs, they kill from a distance with a letter. In our computerized wars fought by weaponized drones, a president can kill from his house with a telephone call. "You just point and click," Conor Oberst sings with the band Desaparecidos. "In the computer's blue glare the bombs burst in the air. There was a city once, now nothing's there." The U.S. administration commands pilots in New Mexico, North Dakota, New York and Georgia, pilots hidden away in trailers that serve as cockpits for drones that fly over villages in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen and fire missiles at human targets. "We've killed 4,700," confessed Senator Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.). In defense of the drone program, he added, "Sometimes you hit innocent people, and I hate that, but we're at war."

When Senator Graham says that "we" are at war, that "we" have killed thousands, I want to distance myself from his "we" and the president's war machine. I am, after all, a child of Latin American immigrants with familial commitments that shift my identity south of the U.S. border. And I'm a Mennonite, a member of a historic peace church whose people conscientiously object to killing enemies. I have good reason not to consider myself part of the "we."

The Lord said to Ahab, "Have you killed, and also taken possession?" Apparently King Ahab was responsible for the killing of Naboth, even though he was nowhere near the crime scene or involved in the plot. It was Jezebel who ordered leaders to enlist two rogues to incite an assembly of people to stone Naboth. Yet Elijah named Ahab as guilty. He was guilty because he profited from the murder: "As soon as

Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.”

I don't know what it takes for someone's name to show up on the U.S. government's kill list. I'm not in the chain of command that authorizes a pilot to blow up a target. Nonetheless I, like Ahab, benefit from the violence of others, from people who follow orders, from the bureaucracy that hides the cruel realities of war. Like Ahab, I can have the life I want to have without troubling my thoughts with my country's ruthless transgressions. I support various forms of U.S. military power every time I deposit my paycheck. My retirement, my savings and my cash depend on global markets policed by our armed forces.

In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas L. Friedman underlines the connection between our economic well-being and the military: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist,” and the hidden fist is called “the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.” In *Pure War*, Paul Virilio goes even further: there is no longer a clear boundary separating “the civil and the military because of the total involvement of the economy in war.” Instead, “All of us are already civilian soldiers, without knowing it.”

I live under the illusion that I'm not involved. I live as if I'm blameless, as if my hands are clean. But God's word shatters such fantasies. With Elijah's question to Ahab, the word of the Lord exposes me to truths I've happily ignored: “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” The truth is that we are entangled—my life and yours, and the life of the soldier or drone pilot or political representative.

Like Ahab and Jezebel, King David tried to keep his hands clean as he arranged the murder of Uriah. Like Jezebel, David used letters to kill his enemy while keeping a safe distance from combat. “But the thing that David had done despised the Lord,” and the prophet Nathan confronted David with the truth: “You are the man! . . . You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword” (2 Sam. 12:7-9). David didn't deny his crime. He didn't run from God's prophet and God's presence, even though this visitation meant judgment. Instead, David let the truth lead him into the freedom discovered in confession: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’”

Elijah's confrontation with Ahab also ends with a lament. King Ahab “tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about

dejectedly” (1 Kings 21:27).

These stories invite me to watch how vengeance unfolds in the world—and to pay attention to the micropolitics of violence in my own life. The stories remind me that I am tangled up in networks of death. David and Ahab lead me into this world, but they also show me what to do after God’s judgment reveals the truth. With their confession and lament they open up a way to new life—to live without illusions, to mourn with our victims near and far, and to pray for God’s grace to interrupt our cycles of violence and to free us from habits of war.