

8/20/23 Worship Service

I Samuel 25:1-35

“Abigail’s Wisdom” – Pastor Lois Harder

Abigail saves David

25 Now Samuel died, and all Israel gathered to mourn for him. They buried him at his home in Ramah. David then left and went down to the Maon wilderness.^[a]

2 There was a man in Maon who did business in Carmel. He was a very important man and owned three thousand sheep and one thousand goats. At that time, he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. **3** The man’s name was Nabal, and his wife’s name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and attractive woman, but her husband was a hard man who did evil things. He was a Calebite.

4 While in the wilderness, David heard that Nabal was shearing his sheep. **5** So David sent ten servants, telling them, “Go up to Carmel. When you get to Nabal, greet him for me. **6** Say this to him: ‘Peace to you,^[b] your household, and all that is yours! **7** I’ve heard that you are now shearing sheep. As you know, your shepherds were with us in the wilderness.^[c] We didn’t mistreat them. Moreover, the whole time they were at Carmel, nothing of theirs went missing. **8** Ask your servants; they will tell you the same. So please receive these young men favorably, because we’ve come on a special day. Please give whatever you have on hand to your servants and to your son David.’”

9 When David’s young men arrived, they said all this to Nabal on David’s behalf. Then they waited. **10** But Nabal answered David’s servants, “Who is David? Who is Jesse’s son? There are all sorts of slaves running away from their masters these days. **11** Why should I take my bread, my water, and the meat I’ve butchered for my shearers and give it to people who came here from who knows where?” **12** So David’s young servants turned around and went back the way they came. When they arrived, they reported every word of this to David.

13 Then David said to his soldiers, “All of you, strap on your swords!” So each of them strapped on their swords, and David did the same. Nearly four hundred men went up with David. Two hundred men remained back with the supplies.

14 One of Nabal’s servants told his wife Abigail, “David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, but he just yelled at them. **15** But the men were very good to us and didn’t mistreat us. Nothing of ours went missing the whole time we were out with them in the fields. **16** In fact, the whole time we were with them, watching our sheep, they were a protective wall around us both night and day. **17** Think about that and see what you can do, because trouble is coming for our master and his whole household. But he’s such a despicable person no one can speak to him.”

18 Abigail quickly took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep ready for cooking, five seahs^[d] of roasted grain, one hundred raisin cakes, and two hundred fig cakes. She loaded all this on donkeys **19** and told her servants, “Go on ahead of me. I’ll be right behind you.” But she didn’t tell her husband Nabal.

²⁰ As she was riding her donkey, going down a trail on the hillside, David and his soldiers appeared, descending toward her, and she met up with them. ²¹ David had just been saying, "What a waste of time—guarding all this man's stuff in the wilderness so that nothing of his went missing! He has repaid me evil instead of good!" ²² May God deal harshly with me, David,^[e] and worse still if I leave alive even one single one who urinates on a wall^[f] belonging to him come morning!"

²³ When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and fell facedown before him, bowing low to the ground. ²⁴ She fell at his feet and said, "Put the blame on me, my master! But please let me, your servant, speak to you directly. Please listen to what your servant has to say. ²⁵ Please, my master, pay no attention to this despicable man Nabal. He's exactly what his name says he is! His name means fool,^[g] and he is foolish!^[h] But I myself, your servant, didn't see the young men that you, my master, sent. ²⁶ I pledge, my master, as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, that the LORD has held you back from bloodshed and taking vengeance into your own hands! But now let your enemies and those who seek to harm my master be exactly like Nabal! ²⁷ Here is a gift, which your servant has brought to my master. Please let it be given to the young men who follow you, my master. ²⁸ Please forgive any offense by your servant. The LORD will definitely make an enduring dynasty for my master because my master fights the LORD's battles, and nothing evil will be found in you throughout your lifetime. ²⁹ If someone chases after you and tries to kill you, my master, then your life will be bound up securely in the bundle of life^[i] by the LORD your God, but he will fling away your enemies' lives as from the pouch of a sling. ³⁰ When the LORD has done for my master all the good things he has promised you, and has installed you as Israel's leader, ³¹ don't let this be a blot or burden on my master's conscience, that you shed blood needlessly or that my master took vengeance into his own hands. When the LORD has done good things for my master, please remember your servant."

³² David said to Abigail, "Bless the LORD God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today!" ³³ And bless you and your good judgment for preventing me from shedding blood and taking vengeance into my own hands today! ³⁴ Otherwise, as surely as the LORD God of Israel lives—the one who kept me from hurting you—if you hadn't come quickly and met up with me, there wouldn't be one single one who urinates on a wall left come morning." ³⁵ Then David accepted everything she had brought for him. "Return home in peace," he told her. "Be assured that I've heard your request and have agreed to it."

³⁶ When Abigail got back home to Nabal, he was throwing a party fit for a king in his house. Nabal was in a great mood and very drunk, so Abigail didn't tell him anything until daybreak. ³⁷ In the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him everything. Nabal's heart failed inside him, and he became like a stone. ³⁸ About ten days later, the LORD struck Nabal, and he died.

³⁹ When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Bless the LORD, who has rendered a verdict regarding Nabal's insult to me and who kept me, his servant, from doing something evil! The LORD has brought Nabal's evil down on his own head." Then David sent word to Abigail, saying that he would take her as his wife.

⁴⁰ When David's servants reached Abigail at Carmel, they said to her, "David has sent us to you so you can become his wife."

⁴¹ She bowed low to the ground and said, "I am your servant, ready to serve and wash the feet of my master's helpers." ⁴² Then Abigail got up quickly and rode on her donkey, with five of her young women going with her. She followed David's messengers and became his wife.

It seems that what we have here this morning is like an ancient Hebrew soap opera! It certainly has a lot of the same kind of drama, the crazy plot twists, the beautiful people, the foolish people, the threat of violence, and the suspense of any good story, making you wonder what's going to happen! But along with all of that, this is also a story of a quick and creative response from the least likely person, bringing peace to a potentially violent situation.

Abigail and her husband Nabal are described as polar opposites. Nabal was a Calebite, one of the most influential clans of Judah. Nabal may have been influential, all right, but not in very positive ways. His name both described and preceded him. Nabal means foolish, churlish, vicious and mean-spirited. One commentary I read described him this way; "Nabal *lives* to defend his property and he dies in an (indulgent party), on his property. Only after being told of his riches are we told his name... His name says it all. He is a fool (nabal)... He has come to think of himself as an autonomous man, believing that 'there is no God', no neighbor, and no social reality. He would indeed do as he pleases. He neither fears nor respects any other, nor does he care for any other." (*Interpretation*, page 175) Abigail, on the other hand "is of 'good understanding and beautiful'. Her beauty may have attracted David. It was, however, her 'good understanding', her shrewd common sense, and her cunning way with words that made a crucial difference..." (*Interpretation*, page 176) Abigail was wise and bold; she was articulate and savvy; she humbled herself and responded creatively in order to be a peacemaker.

It's hard to imagine that Nabal didn't know who David was. Pretty much everyone in the kingdom knew that Saul had been trying to catch and kill David ever since Samuel had rejected Saul and anointed David to be the new king. So Nabal's questions were likely sarcastic and rhetorical, "Who is David? Who is Jesse's son?" In other words, "Who does this guy think he is and why should I, the rich and self-sufficient Nabal give him or his soldiers anything of mine?" Now remember that hospitality was (and still is) of utmost importance in middle-eastern cultures, so Nabal's attitude was churlish, mean-spirited and particularly despicable.

But David wasn't really on his best behavior here, either. He and his men, 600 of them, had been "protecting" Nabal's flocks and shepherds, presumably without an invitation to do so, and then the whole lot of them were conveniently present on shearing day - a big day of celebration and feasting - and David was asking that his entire company be allowed to partake in the party as payment for their unsolicited services. David provoked Nabal and tried to manipulate him by using the conventional, accepted greeting, "Peace to you, your household, and all that is yours!" But after that, his message wasn't one of peace at all! "Peace to you as long as you give me what I want. And if you don't, your peace could be in jeopardy." Tempers flared and the situation quickly escalated.

When Abigail heard from the servant what had transpired, she had the sense to know that the situation could erupt quickly. People could get hurt.

She acted quickly and decisively, doing what was within her power to do. She gathered up the large amount of provisions David had asked for and then she approached him with bold humility. She certainly embodied the physical stance of humility, falling face down before David, pleading her case for her household and even taking on guilt that wasn't hers in order to deflect and redirect the violent threats.

Abigail was well-versed in the ancient Hebrew wisdom of the Torah. She knew that vengeance belongs only to God and that when humans try to exact vengeance, the result is death and destruction. She knew that when vengeance can be avoided, possibilities for other, more creative solutions can be opened – as well as creating space for God's Spirit to work. Abigail was willing to humble herself to create the kind of trust needed to remind David of this and to beg him not to take vengeance into his own hands.

Abigail was wise and prophetic, unafraid to speak truth to power. She knew that when violence is perpetrated, there is as much damage to the person doing the violence as to those whose blood is shed. Abigail was pleading not only for mercy for herself and her own household, but that David himself would not suffer the consequences of bringing violence on others. After all, he had vowed to kill every male in Nabal's household. Abigail knew that committing this kind of violence was no way for David to enter the kingship for which Samuel had anointed him.

Perhaps most ingeniously, Abigail used the element of surprise. She was likely NOT the person that David expected to encounter as he led his army of men toward Nabal's home. She was proactive, she had a plan, she humbled herself, and she took the angry wind right out of David's sails with her surprise appearance and her wise words.

There are other examples of more modern, faithful peacemakers who used their creativity and the element of surprise for peacemaking. Brian Stucky reminded me of a wonderful story about Menno Simons our 16th century faith forefather and our namesake. His radical preaching and teaching about following Jesus had gotten him into all kinds of scrapes with the law and this story, as told by historian John D. Roth goes like this:

"... Menno was once traveling by stagecoach when a group of armed horsemen, carrying a warrant for Menno's arrest, overtook the carriage. As it happened, Menno was seated outside next to the driver. When the soldiers asked him whether Menno Simons was in the carriage, Menno leaned into the coach and said, "They want to know if a Menno Simons is in there." When the occupants said no, Menno answered his pursuers: "They say he is not in there." The horsemen continued on their way.

And Brian also reminded me of another man named Menno who used his creativity and the element of surprise as he faithfully carried out the work God had called him to. This is Menno Fast, John's father who was working with MCC during and just after WW II. I've asked John to share this story with us...

Thanks, John – and Brian, for reminding us of these important peacemaking stories. The story of Abigail is one of many stories in the Bible of women who partnered with God to use wise and surprising creativity to bring peace. Braden and Jill and Mary are going to lead us as we learn a new song in our hymnal called *There is a Line of Women*. Although Abigail isn't specifically named in this song, many other women in the Bible and their stories are included.

Benediction

– Go now, inspired and encouraged, emboldened and humbled, to partner with God using the wisdom and creativity that God has given you to be peacemakers in this world. Amen.