



CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO ANGRY MEN

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 25:1-31
Seventeenth Message
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Every time we turn on the television news these days it appears we are confronted with a story of family abuse played out on the screen. It seems more and more women are trapped in the grip of angry, abusive men. The media circus surrounding the O.J. Simpson case provoked an insightful letter by Dr. James Dobson. "Whatever happened to justice in America?" he asked. Analyzing our society, one columnist got it right when he said, "We are a culture seduced by fame, obsessed by violence, and overrun by the media."

Spousal abuse is not a new problem, however; it is as old as history itself. In our text this morning on the life of David, from the book of 1 Samuel, we come across just such a situation. A woman is trapped in a dispute between two angry men. The men have a high degree of potential for acting in an abusive fashion; one of them is the woman's husband, the other is the king of Israel. Abigail is the heroine of our story. Like Hannah, whom we met earlier in this narrative, Abigail will take center stage and play the lead role in preventing a crisis. We will spend two Sundays on this classic text. Today we will see how Abigail deals with an angry king; next week we will learn how she deals with an abusive fool, Nabal, her husband.

The text is a masterpiece of composition. It is exactly 144 lines long in the Hebrew, and it is composed in almost perfect symmetry. The style in which it is written offers the hope that God can bring perfect redemption in the midst of abusive situations. Through the intervention of Abigail, a situation that appeared to be escalating into a war actually turns out to be wedding.

The text opens with the report of Samuel's death.

I. A Crisis Created (25:1-13)

(a) The Setting

Then Samuel died; and all Israel gathered together and mourned for him, and buried him at his house in Ramah. And David arose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. (NASB)

The death of Israel's esteemed first prophet and spiritual leader brings together all of Israel in mourning. Though Samuel has been absent from this drama for some time, his presence has hovered over the characters like the Shekinah cloud of glory that guided Israel in the wilderness. "Samuel was buried in the courtyard of his own home in Ramah in the hill country of Ephraim. 'Gone, but not forgotten,' as we say. Even to this day the city of Ramah is known among Arabs and Jews as *Nebi Samwil*—the Prophet Samuel" (David Roper). One commentator wrote: "We may wonder why the death notice occurs here. It is as though Samuel has lingered over the narrative, waiting until even Saul has finally acknowledged the turn of destiny. When Saul makes his admission, Samuel's work is indeed com-

pleted and he may die. He has no more to do" (Brueggemann).

No doubt the prophet's death shocked and grieved David. What would he do now that his great intercessor was no more? Would Saul's evil intentions find their mark at last? To make sure they didn't, David headed further south, "to the wilderness of Paran, a vast, semi-arid region that stretched between Judah and the Sinai. In that place David was relatively free from Saul's insane pursuit and could be of service to his countrymen by protecting their flocks from marauding desert tribes" (David Roper).

Next, we are introduced to the abusive Nabal, and to Abigail, his wife, two of the key players in the drama. Verse 2:

Now there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel; and the man was very rich, and he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. And it came about while he was shearing his sheep in Carmel (now the man's name was Nabal, and his wife's name was Abigail. And the woman was intelligent (literally: *good understanding*) and beautiful in appearance, but the man was harsh and evil in his dealings, and he was a Calebite),

Nabal is introduced in terms of his possessions; he was a rich man. "His possessions precede his own person. His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property" (Brueggemann). Only after we learn of his wealth are we told his name: it is Nabal ("fool"). The Hebrew recognizes five kinds of fools, in ascending order of foolishness. The "nabal" is the composite of the grouping, the worst of all the fools. He is absolutely incorrigible and unapproachable. He is the fool who believes there is no God (Psalm 53:1, which David composed). He has no neighbor, and no social obligations. He lives by himself, for himself. He is obsessive and oppressive. He is a true Calebite (i.e. a dog).

Abigail, on the other hand, is introduced with graceful words about her physical beauty ("beautiful"), and her character ("good understanding"). This rare couplet places her in the school of the wise. As we have already seen, both of these terms were used of David earlier in the narrative.

To this home then come David's messengers, bearing an "innocent" request.

(b) An "Innocent" Request

that David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. So David sent ten young men, and David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, visit Nabal and greet him in my name; and thus you shall say, 'Have a long life, peace be to you, and peace be to

your house, and peace be to all that you have. And now I have heard that you have shearers; now your shepherds have been with us and we have not insulted them, nor have they missed anything all the days they were in Carmel. Ask your young men and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we have come on a festive day. Please give whatever you find at hand to your servants and to your son David.” When David’s young men came, they spoke to Nabal according to all these words in David’s name; then they waited.

Nabal’s business was located in Carmel, north of Maon. It was sheep-shearing time, a festive occasion in Israel, much like our harvest festivals, when hearts are open and hospitality is liberally extended. In the spirit of the occasion David sends ten of his men to Carmel, bearing the message, “Peace...peace...peace.” He appeals to the hospitality of the event. (Some of the commentators, however, interpret his message as a Mafia-like threat. According to them, David was seeking protection money.)

The words “And now” (v 7) are uttered so quickly it is obvious that David wants something. Nabal would hardly appreciate the fact that the leader of the band of rogues addresses him as “father,” and attempts to manipulate him by suggesting a family relationship. He does not give a ready response, but makes David’s men wait and wait and wait. One way to intimidate people, as many of you who have traveled in Third World countries have learned, is to keep them waiting.

(c) An Angry Refusal

But Nabal answered David’s servants, and said, “Who is David? And who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are each breaking away from his master. Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men whose origin I do not know?” So David’s young men retraced their way and went back; and they came and told him according to all these words.

Nabal regards David’s band of men as outlaws and terrorists, and this proud businessman is not about to accede to their demands. His question, “Who is David?” does not necessarily imply that he is unaware of who David is (by now everyone knows about him), but that he considers him a nobody. Nabal deals in big business; he has no time for beggars and gypsies. In Hebrew, the first person ending is used seven times in verse 11 (this even comes across in the translation). Contrary to everyone else mentioned in 1 Samuel, Nabal refuses to recognize the future of the anointed one. Indignantly he denies the request of the men, so they retrace their steps and report his response to David.

David is enraged by what they tell him.

(d) The Bomb Bursts

And David said to his men, “Each of you gird on his sword.” So each man girded on his sword. And David also girded on his sword, and about four hundred men went up behind David while two hundred stayed with the baggage.

The angry David assembles his men and, girding on their swords, they divide into ranks, with specific orders,

and off they march to fight their own private, holy war. Testosterone has replaced good sense. How quickly an injustice suffered leads to rage, and rage to murder. An angry fool is about to be confronted by an angry king, and it appears nothing can prevent the looming confrontation.

At this point Abigail enters the drama.

II. Crisis Intervention (25:14-21)

(a) Abigail Hears of the Crisis

But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal’s wife, saying, “Behold, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, and he scorned them (literally: *screamed at them*). Yet the men were very good to us, and we were not insulted, nor did we miss anything as long as we went about with them, while we were in the fields. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the time we were with them tending the sheep. Now therefore, know and consider what you should do, for evil is plotted against our master and against all his household; and he is such a worthless man that no one can speak to him.”

The escalation of the conflict between these two angry men, David and Nabal, is interrupted by a servant. In God’s economy, only one person is needed to defuse the crisis and save the day. The young man makes a good report of David and his men to the only person he knows can intervene with authority, and that is Abigail. He knows it is useless to speak to Nabal. That approach had been tried already. “No one can speak to him,” says the young man. This was not news to Abigail. She had been living with Nabal. She knew him only too well.

So she knows she must take immediate action.

(b) Abigail Acts

Then Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves of bread and two jugs of wine and five sheep already prepared and five measures of roasted grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. And she said to her young men, “Go on before me; behold, I am coming after you.” But she did not tell her husband Nabal. And it came about as she was riding on her donkey and coming down by the hidden part of the mountain, that behold, David and his men were coming down toward her; so she met them. Now David had said, “Surely in vain I have guarded all that this man has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; and he has returned me evil for good. May God do so to the enemies of David, and more also, if by morning I leave as much as one male of any who belong to him.”

Abigail wastes no time in intervening. This crisis demands that immediate, decisive action be taken, and Abigail lives up to her reputation for quick decision-making. She possesses well-honed negotiating skills; she has lived with abuse her whole married life. She chooses to go to the only party, David, with whom negotiation is possible. She gathers an abundance of foodstuffs, “a feast for a king,” and wastes no time in dispatching them to David. She doesn’t tell her husband. Lives are at stake, and he has absolutely no discernment. To establish surprise, she sends the gifts ahead of her, while she remains hidden in a ravine, revealing herself only at the last moment.

Meanwhile David is fuming, muttering under his breath how vain was the good he had performed for Nabal. He is so angry he can't even mention Nabal by name. Then he binds himself by oath under God to carry out his own holy war. I was stunned when I translated the words used for "male." They form the crude, explicit comment: "those who urinate against the wall." That is how David referred to these Calebites (as dogs). The phrase was used of people who were despised.

Abigail has her work cut out for her. Can she disarm this angry king, and get him to revoke the irrevocable?

III. Disarming the Bomb (25:23-31)

(a) Abigail's Posture: Humility (23-24)

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and dismounted from her donkey, and fell on her face before David, and bowed herself to the ground. And she fell at his feet and said, "On me alone, my lord, be the blame. And please let your maidservant speak to you, and listen to the words of your maidservant.

Abigail approaches David with humility and tranquillity. This rare combination is enough to capture the attention of any man. Notice that her every movement is downward. "Coming down by the hidden part of the mountain," at just the right moment she appears before David. She dismounts from her donkey, and falls face down upon the ground. Notice the three statements of subjection: *dismounted* her donkey, *fell* before David's face on her face, *bowed* toward the ground at his feet. Such a display of humility is so striking, it arouses a curiosity that displaces the thirst for revenge. "A gentle answer turns away wrath," says the proverb. David remembered that this had been his own posture before Saul in Engedi. Abigail takes full responsibility for what happened when David's men came seeking provisions. Taking Nabal out of the equation, she places herself at the center of the crisis.

Next, she offers good counsel to David for dealing with fools.

(b) Her Counsel Regarding Nabal: "Forget him!" (25)

"Please do not let my lord pay attention to this worthless man, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly is with him; but I your maidservant did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent.

Abigail is saying, in effect, "Concerning my husband, he is a fool ('son of Belial'). You have a right to angry. But do not deal with him; deal with me. The problem was really one of miscommunication." Standing face to face with the beautiful Abigail, David's anger is thoroughly defused. Abigail offers excellent advice: leave insane people alone in their insanity. The proverb says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself" (Prov 26:4). Chronically arrogant people are impossible to reason with. "Though you grind a fool in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him" (Prov 27:22). Let fools self-destruct. Do not be tempted to try and chasten them; life will accomplish that.

(c) Her Exhortation: "Where Is God In Your Equation?" (26)

"Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, since the LORD has restrained you

from shedding blood, and from avenging yourself by your own hand, now then let your enemies, and those who seek evil against my lord, be as Nabal.

Now that Abigail has David's undivided attention she has to convince him to take back the impulsive oath, uttered when he vowed to leave no one living who belonged to Nabal. She takes her husband out of the equation and places herself in the middle of it. And she brings the LORD back into the equation. "The LORD sent me to restrain you from taking revenge by your own hand," is her word to David. She undoes his oath with a greater oath of her own. David was on the verge of usurping the role of a Holy God. He was attempting to take vengeance, an action that God reserves to himself. God had restrained David, and God will judge Nabal, says Abigail: "May He make your enemies as Nabal!" Such confidence has she that God is going to judge Nabal, that she refers to him in the past tense. She has been living with his abuse her whole married life, yet she never took things into her own hands. She asks David to follow her example of faith.

Finally, she exhorts David to look at the big picture.

(d) Her Motivation: "Look at the Big Picture!" (27-31)

"And now let this gift which your maidservant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who accompany my lord. Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD and evil shall not be found in you all your days. And should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; but the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling. And it shall come about when the LORD shall do for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall appoint you ruler over Israel, that this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord, both by having shed blood without cause and by my lord having avenged himself.

David's anger over Nabal's refusal to pay tribute is no longer the issue. Abigail has brought the gift he wanted. To get him back on track, she subtly reminds him of his holy calling by giving him a history lesson. She reminds him of his battle with Goliath, saying, "You are fighting the battles of the LORD, and your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling." If a history lesson was not enough to motivate David, a little forward thinking might. Abigail continues, "Look ahead to your public coronation as king over all Israel. What do you want that day to be like? Would you want this incident on your conscience when you receive that ground to all the praise of Israel?"

I like to use this strategy to encourage youngsters to sexual purity. I ask them to cast their minds forward to their wedding day, when they are making their vows to their partners. How would they feel, I ask them, if they looked out over the assembled crowd and see people with whom they already had sexual relationships? Would they want that on their conscience?

So Abigail encourages David to enlarge his perspective to embrace both the distant past and the ultimate future of his coronation.

Then she makes a personal request.

(e) Her Personal Request

“When the LORD shall deal well with my lord, then remember your maidservant.”

Abigail knows that God will exalt David, thus she throws in her lot with the new, as yet unrealized, kingdom, much like Rahab did with the spies who invaded Jericho. How intriguing. In the same way, God requires Christians to pledge their allegiance to the new King before his reign is evident.

Abigail’s words completely disarm David. Summoned back to his holy calling, he says to her, “Blessed be the Lord of Israel who sent you to me today.”

IV. Reflections

(a) The Role of Women in Samuel: Ruth, Hannah, and Abigail

Though women do not occupy the leading roles in the book of Samuel, they occupy a high place as crucial players in the kingdom of God. First Samuel emerges out of the memory of the Judges, and the only bright light of that book is the story of a Moabite woman whose tenacious loyal-love gave birth to the line of David. Then the story of Samuel opens with Hannah, whose pain over her barrenness leads to a prayer that changes the course of the nation. Through Hannah’s faithful prayers not only is a son given, but the whole prophetic office is born in Israel and light returns to a nation enveloped in darkness. The spiritual perception and prophetic insight she displays in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) far outweigh any utterances of her contemporary male counterparts.

This same greatness is evident in Abigail. Her actions of humility and subjection, interspersed with lightning-like confrontation, disarm David’s anger and prevent his rule from turning into a disaster. Now we have the answer to the question with which we opened our text. What would David do without the prophetic words of Samuel to keep him in line? The answer is, God sent a woman. Her

words are as pure and as true as those of any prophet, and they function accordingly to restore David to his proper role as king. The result is that war is averted, and a wedding is inaugurated.

Oftentimes women are the first to anticipate the onset of a crisis. It is because they possess an intuitive instinct to act. Abigail’s ability to function as a prophet was not contingent on her husband’s support. Nor did she need official recognition to function this way. She was a prophet by divine gift and character. And after the fact she still continued to function well as a homemaker. Her prophetic gift did not impede that ability. In this she anticipates what would happen in the Jesus story. Women would be first bearers of the good news of his birth, and the first witnesses to his resurrection. Later, as the book of Acts records, women would stand as equal with men in that they too possessed the Holy Spirit, and they too would share the prophetic gift in the church.

You might ask, “What was Abigail’s secret? How did she acquire such a prophetic skill while married to the fool?”

(b) Abigail’s Secret

The answer is found in her name. Abigail means, “*My father is joy!*” As a woman, she did not place her hope in men to set things right. Her confidence rested in God. God was her Father, her perfect source of *joy*. He was the one who broke through her abusive circumstances to mold her soul, craft her life, arm her with graceful speech, and endow her with leadership skills powerful enough to correct heads of state.

Thank God we have many Abigails in this church. They appear, seemingly out of nowhere at times, to correct us and point out crises to which we are blind. I am thankful, too, that I married an Abigail. She is not afraid to speak the truth to me, yet she knows how to disarm me. No one functions better to keep me on track, help me to think clearly, and assist me to maintain my role in life on the strait and narrow path. With David, I say, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me.”

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