

Abigail the Amazing

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Feb. 11, 2018

Based on I Cor. 3: 16-23 and 1 Samuel 25:1-35

I'm going to begin this morning with the fun fact that the name, Nabal means, "fool." Silly thing for a father to name his son, "fool," but there you have it. It's one of many examples testifying that the Bible mixes up historical truth with elements of fiction just for entertainment's sake. Naming a character "Fool" is code the Bible uses to say, "Hey, the following story, while about David who is a genuine historical figure, may have elements of fable about it meant to make the hearer smile; the mixture of fact and fiction in the is not unusual by any means – think of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. Yes, and any way you cut it, the story *is* true with a capital T. See if you don't agree.

Now, at the time of the story, David is not yet a king. He is a traditional warlord – think of the Arab world today. He runs a protection racket -- his men offer "protection" to landowners; protection for their animals from wild critters, and protection from other warlords wanting to offer their own "protections."

David happens to be in the neighborhood of this rich landowner named Nabal. After "protecting" him without Nabal's consent, David sends out a lead party of his servants to set up a dinner – that's the pay he expects for his services.

But Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" So David's young men turned away, and came back and told him all this. David said to his men, "Every one of you, strap on your sword!"

And every one of them strapped on his sword; David also strapped on his sword; and about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage. But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, about this.

Here's a little sidebar to the story. Abigail is the 7th most popular girl's name today, following in order: Emma, Olivia, Sophia, Ava, Isabella, and Mia – all names that end in the letter "a." She's a worthy woman to name your daughter, as we shall see. Back to the story.

Then Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. She loaded them on donkeys and said to her young men, "Go on ahead of me; I am coming after you." But she did not tell her husband, Nabal. Smart woman.

As she rode the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, David and his men came down toward her; and she met them. When Abigail saw David, she hurried and alighted from the donkey, fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, "Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him;

Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house, because you are fighting the battles of the LORD; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, [your life] shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the LORD your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling.

[So] when the LORD has done to you according to all the good that [God] has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, [you] shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause. And when the LORD has dealt well with you, then remember [me]."

David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today . . . from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the LORD the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male.

Great story. Full of interesting psychological moments. It may not surprise you to hear that in short-order Nabal has a fatal heart attack and Abigail is suddenly a free agent and she's picked up quickly by, guess who?

She's a real find. She reminds David who he is, and whose he is. Something all people in places of power need to know.

There is no reason to act rashly, she insists: "Wake up, David -- your life is bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the lord your God."

"Bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the lord your God."

David is reminded that his life is bigger than he thinks. He has purposes to carry out that are larger than his own, which is true for all of us in little, and big ways.

Abigail gave him perspective; she took him into the future. Here's how she did it.

"When you become king you surely wouldn't want to remember a day when a petty slight led you to shed buckets of innocent blood."

At our more irrational moments we all need someone to say to us, "Is this really what you want?" Maybe the answer is a resounding yes, or maybe it's a pitiful, no. Either way, we need to answer that question for ourselves.

David has to ask himself, "Am I at heart a bully and a tyrant?" Surely he was capable of such, but, no, he was more than that because his purposes were tied up with God's purposes.

This is an important issue for all of us – domestic violence is front and center in the news today. When the front door is shut and men are home with their families, how do they behave? If they are insecure by nature, might they become bullies and tyrants at home? It's an old old story, and it's as current as this morning's front page.

Okay, that's how it is domestically. How about for born leaders like David? Are world leaders today tempted, like David, to strut their stuff when they feel slighted?

There was talk this past week of a possible grand military parade down Pennsylvania Avenue to be scheduled for this coming Veteran's Day – something like the Bastille Day parade in Paris, or the May Day Parade in Moscow.

Here is what one Republican Senator from Louisiana had to say about that possibility on Wednesday – see if you can hear an echo of Abigail's tone with David.

The Senator said, "I think confidence is silent, and insecurity is loud. America is the most powerful country in all of human history. You don't need to show it off ... We're not North Korea, we're not Russia, and we're not China, and I don't want to be. And for that reason I would be against flaunting our strength. We don't need to; everybody knows we have it."

The late British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher is remembered to have said, "Power is like being a Lady ... if you have to *tell* people you are, you aren't."

Finally, Abraham Lincoln once said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

This is all about knowing who you are and being comfortable with that when push comes to shove.

As I have said before, Terence Publius Afer, the Roman playwrights, made the most important statement in history about self-knowledge. He said, "I am a man; nothing human is alien to me."

I am a human being. As such, I am capable of committing the worst atrocities, I am capable of falling to the most petty indulgences, and also of rising to the most sublime acts of selflessness. That's exactly who we are. Both at the same time.

The part of Jesus' famous parable about the prodigal son that never fails to arrest me is the part where the young man runs through all of his inheritance and takes the only job he can find as an exile in a foreign land – feeding a man's pigs.

He loses weight. He loses hope and one day the slop he is feeding the pigs looks good to him and he is tempted to eat it. It is right then that Jesus adds the clinching touch – he says that at that moment “he came to himself.”

Like David the young man saw just how far he had fallen. And he was terrified to consider how he might be remembered after he was gone.

This happens to people every single day.

So, let me advise, there is a David inside every one of us. It comes out of us at the oddest times. Be sensitive to your restlessness in these last weeks before spring. This time of year we can get pretty cranky.

Remember, you're only human. But also remember who and whose you are.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians, the great positive thinker of the 1st century says, “Don't you know that you are God's temple – God's spirit dwells in you?”

Paul's idea is that we can get infinite benefit from waking to the idea that we are precious in value because something of the creator lives in us all.

Last week we looked at Rahab the Wise. This week it is Abigail the Amazing. I wonder particularly what role Abigail may have played in the court of David going forward. She certainly had what David needed to rule wisely.

It's widely understood that Nancy Reagan deserves a lot of credit for the implementation of the policy of detente with the Russians. Without her advice that strategy and what followed from it, may never have happened.

Let me end with the story of an amazing woman who lived in the Byzantine world of the 5th century. I'm speaking of a woman who would eventually become Empress Theodora. Theodora came from humble origins. She was born in Syria in 497 AD. Her father, Acacius, was a wild animal trainer in the Hippodrome in Constantinople; her mother was a dancer and an actress.

Life, growing up at the Hippodrome, was exciting for Theodora, but it became very difficult when her father died.

In no time, Theodora and her sisters were performing there themselves. They did gymnastics routines, dances, and eventually young Theodora performed comic monologues. Theatre in the 6th Century was considered sketchy, morally speaking, and it would later be banned entirely.

At the age of 16, Theodora became the mistress of a Syrian official for four years, moving with him to Egypt, but he became abusive and abandoned her.

She changed professions, working then as a wool spinner. According to tradition, Justinian, the emperor, spied her at her spinning wheel and fell in love at first sight. But it is more likely that she met him through a ballet-dancer named Macedonia who worked part-time as an informer for the emperor.

Justinian was 40 when they met. He was unlike any ruler of his time, being very devout and studious. It is said that he fell in love with her because of her beauty, and her highly developed sense of humor. She made him laugh.

Theodora soon showed what she was made of during political unrest in the year 532. Those who rioted then had many grievances, some of which stemmed from Justinian and Theodora's own actions. They set many public buildings on fire, and proclaimed one of their own as the new emperor.

Unable to control the mob, Justinian and his officials suggested fleeing the capitol but Theodora declared that she would not run away. She said she would rather die at her post rather than live in shame as an exile.

She famously declared that 'purple makes a fine funeral shroud.' Because of her courage and counsel, Justinian ordered his troops to storm the Hippodrome. It worked. The rebels were routed. After attaining victory, Justinian gave Theodora real power, making her his co-ruler and the most powerful woman in the Byzantine Empire.

Together she and Justinian rebuilt and reformed Constantinople. They built bridges and aqueducts, and more than 25 churches including the Hagia Sophia. The Byzantine Empire prospered for 19 years under their rule.

And here is what Theodora did with her power. She closed brothels and cracked down on forced prostitution. She opened a convent where ex-prostitutes could support themselves. She made rape punishable by death, and forbade the death penalty for wives for committing adultery.

Even better, she insisted that women receive property ownership in cases of divorce, something unheard of at the time. Finally, she forbade the exposure of infants, and gave mothers guardianship rights over their children.

As a result of her efforts, women in the Byzantine Empire had far higher status than women in the Middle East and the rest of Europe. It was a watershed in history.

And yet, women only had power if powerful men ceded it to them. Like Theodora and Abigail, they couldn't achieve it on their own merit alone.

We live in interesting times, do we not? A burning question, asked just this weekend is – is the current movement to give women power over their own lives and fate, a movement of the spirit of God, or is it, as some are saying, simply an “anti-patriarchal” movement meant to “undo ten thousand years of recorded history”?

It doesn't really matter what I say about it. What matters is what we all will do in the next few months and years. The challenge is there. But I believe history is bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord, our God.

Amen