

CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: ABIGAIL

I Samuel 25:23-31

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

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; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is 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, the life of my lord 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. When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.”

I.

Today in our summer sermon series on Characters with Character, we encounter another strong female from the Old Testament – Abigail. Abigail bears the 26th most popular name given to girls in America so far in 2021.¹ When we meet her toward the end of I Samuel, the first word the Biblical narrator uses to describe Abigail is *beautiful*.² The poet Stephen Dunn, who died earlier this year, has written:

...Think what happens
when beautiful women are around.
We do not question
that a thousand ships are launched.³

In the eye of the beholder? A platitude.
A beautiful woman enters a room,
and everyone beholds. Geography changes.
We watch her everywhere she goes.

¹ See <https://www.babycenter.com/top-baby-names>, accessed 7/23/21.

² footnote

³ This a reference to Marlowe’s description/question concerning Helen of Troy, in “The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus” (1604).

But Dunn goes on to say:

*Intelligence warmed by generosity
is inner beauty...*⁴

Abigail is one of those women who has both *inner* and *outer* beauty.

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The second word the narrator uses to describe Abigail is *clever*. Noted literary scholar Robert Alter translates the Hebrew word for “clever” as “having a good mind.”⁵ Most of what we see in Abigail’s story is *quickness of mind* and *eloquence of tongue* in her marriage to a powerful man who is at odds with another man about to become King of Israel.

When the narrator introduces us to Abigail’s *husband*, he first describes where the man is *from* (Maon), where his *property* lies (Carmel), and what his *status* is (“very rich” with “three thousand sheep and a thousand goats.”)⁶ Think Warren Buffett. Think Bill Gates. Perhaps he too launched himself into space.

The narrator then tells us the name of Abigail’s husband *Nabal* and immediately describes him as *surly and mean*. The narrator also specifies that Nabal is a “Calebite,”⁷ which means he has descended from a long line of heroic military leaders, several hundred years back to Caleb, who first spied out the Promised Land for Joshua and encouraged the people of Israel to have courage and go forth into the Land.⁸ Apparently the genetic disposition for *heroism* had run its course by the time Nabal was born.

At this time in Israel’s history, the people of God have been in the Promised Land several hundred years.⁹ They are ruled by their own tribal chieftains known as “judges”; and it has not gone well.¹⁰ Their last judge Samuel has died,¹¹ but not before anointing Saul¹² to be the first King in Israel and then fairly soon thereafter David to be his successor.¹³ But Saul who remains on the throne has not yet accepted David and has tried to kill him,¹⁴ leaving David and a ragtag band of warriors to roam the wilderness and live off the land awaiting Saul’s inevitable demise.¹⁵

⁴ Stephen Dunn, “Beautiful Women,” in *New and Selected Poems 1974-1994*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 26-27. Available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=pCKwAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA26&lpg=PA26&dq=Stephen+Dunn+%22Beautiful+Women%22&source=bl&ots=0UeyrP-M8C&sig=ACfU3U1YatzA6sLAiPDjLyMhoDRDbuCllg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiS1duJvzxAhXWfVvKfHbTpD8EQ6AEwCXoECB0QAw#v=onepage&q=Stephen%20Dunn%20%22Beautiful%20Women%22&f=false>

⁵ Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 385.

⁶ I Samuel 25:2.

⁷ I Samuel 25:3.

⁸ Numbers 13-14.

⁹ Genesis 12:1-4.

¹⁰ This is presented in the Book of Judges.

¹¹ I Samuel 25:1.

¹² I Samuel 9.

¹³ I Samuel 16.

¹⁴ I Samuel 18:10-16.

¹⁵ I Samuel 21-24.

David's warriors have been guarding *Nabal's* shepherds while they shear Nabal's sheep. According to Nabal's shepherds, all has gone smoothly.¹⁶ David's warriors grow hungry and ask Nabal's shepherds for some food and provisions.¹⁷

But when the shepherds relay the request to Nabal, Nabal will have nothing of to do with it.

Who is *David*? [Nabal asks.]

Who is the *son of Jesse*?

There are *many* servants today who are *breaking away* from their masters.

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?¹⁸

An ancient rabbi counted eight grammatical expressions of the first-person singular in the Hebrew of this sentence: "I," "I," "I"; "Me," "My," "Mine." Nabal lives up to his reputation.¹⁹

Now at this point David is still a young man, having just slain Goliath "with a sling and a stone";²⁰ and he reacts the way many young men do when challenged on the streets or in the fields: "*Every man strap on his sword!*" About four hundred men go up with David to battle the forces of Nabal.²¹

II.

It is at this point that Abigail *enters* and *takes over* the story.

She has been married to this *churlish, mean, and wealthy* man for an unspecified period of time.

- She has so far managed to *survive* that marriage.
- She has learned *what to do* in light of his outbursts.
- His servants *recognize* and *appreciate* this in her.

When the servants tell her David's request and Nabal's refusal, they don't try to tell her how to handle Nabal; they know she knows how to do that. They simply tell her the facts and say, "Consider what you should do."²² Abigail then *springs* into action.

She assembles the provisions her husband has refused to provide David:

- 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.

¹⁶ I Samuel 25:15-16.

¹⁷ I Samuel 25:4-9.

¹⁸ I Samuel 25:10-11.

¹⁹ Alter 387, referring to Shimon Bar-Efrat.

²⁰ I Samuel 17, especially vs. 50.

²¹ I Samuel 25:13.

²² I Samuel 25:14-17.

She *loads* them on donkeys, *sends* servants ahead of her, and, as she has likely learned from past experience, does *not* tell Nabal. Then she *leaves*.²³

She and her servants ride directly *into the line of fire* where David has amassed four hundred troops. David's troops are *poised* for battle, and he has already invoked a curse upon himself, saying

God do so to David and more also,
If by morning I leave so much as one male
Of all who belong to [Nabal].²⁴

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When Abigail sees David, she alights from her donkey, approaches him in front of his troops, bows to the ground and – fully aware of the danger – says, with all her beauty and intelligence:

...Please let your servant speak in your ears,
And hear the words of your servant.

...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...

Abigail has described with *complete* and *quick accuracy* the nature of her *husband*, the nature of their *marriage*, and the nature of the *armed standoff* in which she has placed herself to try to make peace.

Her speech to David continues:

...Since the Lord has *restrained you from bloodguilt*
And from *taking vengeance with your own hand*,
Now let your enemies
And those who seek to do evil to my lord be like *Nabal*.

She offers him the *present* she has brought.

She promises that “the Lord will certainly make my lord *a sure house*,” because, she says, “my lord is *fighting the battles of the Lord*.” She promises:

If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life,
The life of my lord 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*.

²³ I Samuel 25:18-20.

²⁴ I Samuel 25:22. The KJV reads “if I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall.” The latter phrase is a vulgarity used in the Bible to describe men and boys in statements of curse and invective. It is battlefield intensity and hatred.

She concludes saying:

...the Lord...has appointed you *prince over Israel*,
My lord shall have no cause of grief,
Or pangs of conscience,
For having shed blood without cause
Or for having saved himself.

And she adds:

...when the Lord has dealt well with my lord,
then *remember your servant.*

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This is one of the most intelligent and packed speeches in the Bible:

- When Abigail says to David, “The Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt,” she is describing the immediately preceding episode in which David has *walked away* from the opportunity to take Saul’s life.²⁵
- When Abigail says, “The *present* that your servant has brought,” she is calling to memory a famous incident in their nation’s past when Jacob offers gifts to Esau as he seeks to reconcile with his brother.²⁶
- When she says, “My Lord is *fighting the battles* of the Lord,” she is subtly referring to why the people of Israel have sought a King like David in the first place, their desire for a King who will “fight their battles for them.”²⁷
- When she says, “The lives of your enemies he shall *sling* out as from the hollow of a sling,” she is alluding to the *sling* and the *stone* with which David has just slain Goliath.²⁸
- And finally, when Abigail says to David “the Lord will certainly make you *a sure house*,” she becomes the second person in scripture to “prophecy” about David’s future²⁹ and at the same time assumes the role of prophet in that period between the death of Samuel³⁰ and the advent of Nathan³¹ a good number of years later.

III.

I know this is complicated. I know this is hard to follow. You don’t have to get all the details or remember all the details. But know this:

- Abigail is a woman described as *beautiful* but who uses her *intelligence* to navigate between two powerful and angry men, one of whom is her *husband*, one of whom is *King in waiting*, to defuse a situation which could have been the end of all of three of them.

²⁵ I Samuel 24.

²⁶ Genesis 32-33, especially 33:1.

²⁷ I Samuel 8, especially vs. 20.

²⁸ I Samuel 17:50.

²⁹ The first is Jonathan in I Samuel 23:

³⁰ I Samuel 25:1.

³¹ II Samuel 7:2.

- Abigail's actions *prepare the way* for the natural *death* of her husband (which will soon occur) and for David's *ascent* to the throne.
- Abigail does this with the "*intelligence* warmed by *generosity* that is [her] *inner beauty*."
- She does this with *courage*.
- She does this with *confidence*.
- And she does this through her *eloquent speech* which draws on *allusions to prior events in Israel's history* in the faith she and David share. Abigail knows her Bible. She uses its stories to bring *peace not war, diplomacy not violence, an olive branch* rather than a *club*.

Abigail has *saved David's conscience* by convincing him *not* to take *vengeance* into his own hands; and *she has possibly saved his life* by convincing him *not* to go into *battle* against her husband at this particular time. For that salvation, he blesses her.³²

IV.

Until I chose Abigail as a "character with character" for my class this summer, I had paid little or no attention to her. But she has opened me to several possibilities I want to share with you:

- First, if you are a person like Nabal – wealthy, churlish, mean, threatened by every request for assistance even by those tending a portion of your possessions, drinking too much to appreciate the beauty of the person you love (or once loved) – then maybe you should be grateful that Abigail has introduced you to Nabal whose foolishness might lead you to turn from your own and share more with those who have helped you build your life, your fortune, or that of our nation.
- Second, if you are blessed like David, on the rise, destined for power and prestige, but a bit impatient as to when these blessings will fully materialize; and if you are still riding high from your stunning defeat of Goliath that you have now been lead to think that all matters can be settled by the force of your own personality if not your own hands – then maybe you should be grateful to Abigail for teaching David, and through him you, the value of *diplomacy*, the value of *patience political and personal*, the value of *eloquence* over guns, *words* over fists. Who knows? Once you become King, you might even compose a few psalms in your spare time that will benefit others: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."³³
- And third: if you are a woman or girl – with inner beauty, outer beauty, or both; with intelligence, wisdom, courage, faith, street smarts and the trust of those who know you, yet you are tied to a man who is on the verge of doing damage to everything he touches including you, your family, your work, your calling, even your nation – then perhaps in Abigail's willingness to *step forward* and *speak out*, she is the "character with character" from whom you can draw wisdom, inspiration and strength, so that you too, may "enter the room" and "change...the geography."

³²The story ends the next morning: Once Nabal is sober, Abigail tells him what she has done. He has an immediate heart attack or stroke. Ten days later, he dies, which the narrator attributes to both the justice and action of God. It is a logical outcome to a story in which David, on the verge of assuming the throne, learns that that vengeance belongs only to God (I Samuel 25:36-38). Additionally, in act of territorial union rather than romantic attraction, David asks Abigail to marry him; she accepts (I Samuel 25:39-44); and years later bears his second son Chileab (II Samuel 3:3). Jarring to us, these two elements serve as logical outcomes to the story, even though God exercising vengeance and marriage being for reasons of dynastic territory are far removed from us personally, theologically and in many instances culturally as well.

³³ Psalm 23:1.

V.

Some of you sometimes ask: Where do you get this stuff for your sermons?

The question pleases my ego (depending on the tone of voice), but I can say that I only get this stuff from spending time with these characters, reading their stories, reading what others have drawn from them over the centuries, teaching them, preaching them, sharing them with you. I'm just a "sinner in the hands" of a good story.

This week, I read what a friend of the late Texas novelist Larry McMurtry wrote about him upon his death:

He relished the company of his characters....
He didn't know how to quit them.³⁴

I don't know how to "quit" these Biblical characters.

But so far, I haven't found a reason to try.

Amen.

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³⁴ Leon Wieseltier, "The Wise, Too, Shed Tears," in *Liberties* (Volume 1, Number 4, September 2021), page 320.