Abigail

I Samuel 25

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As you might imagine, I own quite a few different versions of the Bible. As I was working on this sermon from home on Thursday, I opened up my home copy of the NRSV translation to discover that in this publisher’s version, the heading they put on the story of Abigail is “David and the Wife of Nabal.” I had a grumpy moment when I saw that, because it’s bad enough that the Bible so often leaves out the names of women and their stories, but when the publisher identifies a woman, who ***is*** named, only by her relationship to her husband (especially since his name is “fool”), that seems a bit over the top.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that by doing that, the publisher inadvertently has drawn our attention to the reality of Abigail’s life, as well as that of too many women throughout history and even in our time. Abigail would have been told from the time she was a child that she was worth less than any brothers she might have had. She would have been given no choice in her marriage (obviously, because no woman who is described here first as being intelligent would have willingly married such a buffoon.). She was probably married off to Nabal because he was rich. From the description we are given of Nabal throughout this story, she may have been abused by him, certainly mistreated, seen as a possession by a man who clearly values his possessions only for what he can get out of them. As one commentator notes, Nabal’s whole being is consumed by his property, and he believes he needs no one nor is he beholden to anyone. (Brueggemann, Interpretation, p. 175). In her time and place, this woman, described as “clever,” or “intelligent” as well as “beautiful” had no control over her life and her only value was as a man’s property.

Which makes this story all the more extraordinary. In the Jewish Talmud, the authoritative commentary on the scriptures from ancient times, Abigail is named as one of the 7 female prophets of the Hebrew Bible. She is the only woman in the Bible described as first intelligent and then beautiful. She almost single-handedly stops a massacre and also stops the future king of Israel, David, from committing an unjust act that would stain his reputation before he could actually become king. She speaks with authority about theological and political matters and a powerful man listens to her and is swayed by her words.

She faced enormous odds against success; nevertheless, she persisted.

With the help of God. And the help of others who lived similarly disempowered lives, like the servant who came to tell her what her idiot of a husband had just done.

I want to pause here a minute and talk about the servants. We don’t know any of their names. But I will guarantee you that Abigail alone could not have gotten together 200 loaves of bread, 2 skins of wine, 5 slaughtered sheep, 5 pounds of grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 cakes of figs, put them on donkeys, and taken them down the hill to David and his army. A group of men and women worked with her, none of them revealing this plan to Nabal by the way, and they bear part of the credit for the success of this operation. Which succeeded in part because Nabal would never have expected any of them to do such a thing, so they flew (or rode donkeys) under the radar. She must have lived in such a way that the household servants respected her and were willing to risk everything to see that her plan succeeded. You really do reap what you sow when it comes to human relationships.

I love Abigail’s story. I send it out today to anyone who has been underestimated by others. I send it out to anyone who has had their life controlled by others: parents, spouses, employers, the sexism or racism that surrounds us. I send it out to those who see wrongs that need to be righted, large or small, and wonder if they can make a difference. Abigail’s story says you can, with the help of God and with the help of others around you who believe in the cause and who believe in you; they exist, and though they may seem to be as powerless as you, together you have power.

David said to Abigail, after she gave him her gifts and made her case to him, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today.” David names a woman, who by custom of the time should not even have spoken to a man who was not a relative, as a messenger of God. David, who had known the great prophet Samuel, recognizes Abigail as a prophet in his midst.

I think of the young woman, Darnella Frazier, a black teenager, surely one of the more disempowered people in our society, who took the video of George Floyd’s death. She knew she could not physically stop the officer who killed Floyd, nor did her words save that officer from committing murder as Abigail’s words saved David from killing half her household. But Darnella had the courage to keep filming, and then not to just sit on that video, but to share it with the world, hoping against hope that this act by someone without power might reach those with the power to hold the killer accountable.

I think of Malala Yousafzai, and of Greta Thunberg, and of the parents of the children killed at Sandy Hook School, and the student survivors from Parkland High School in Florida, all of whom were nobodies in the eyes of the world before they stood up for what they believed in, seeking to prevent violence and death and lift up hope for life and love against the odds. Abigail is their patron prophet.

She can be ours, too, whenever the odds seem stacked against us or against someone we love or a cause we believe in. “Persist,” she whispers in our ear, this messenger from God, “find others to help you. Listen for the words God will give you. Believe in God. Believe in yourself. Don’t let anyone tell you that you don’t matter.” Amen.