

Save Me From Myself

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I Samuel 25, Galatians 2:11-14

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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The last time we saw David, he and his men had returned to their hideout in the wilderness. As you may recall, David refused to act violently against King Saul and was content to let God write the next chapters of that story. So he finds himself in the “hill country”, or the wilderness of Paran. There are about 600 men with him, and in our reading for today, we’ll see that hiding out from a delusional king is a) not a full-time job and b) doesn’t put food on the table.



The wilderness can be a dicey place. I’ve been in the area where David was on that day, and I’m here to tell you that that part of present-day Jordan is bleak indeed. Even now you can go for miles and miles without seeing much of anything, and there are plenty of cliffs and caves in which ne’er-do-wells and miscreants can hide. In fact, when Jesus told one of his most famous stories, he pointed to the danger of the wilderness. Do you remember the parable of the “Good Samaritan”? The man who was on his way to Jerusalem who was beaten to within an inch of his life by the bandits on the road in the wilderness?

Apparently, while David and his men were hiding in the wilderness, they set up shop as a sort of security force for the Israelites in that region. All winter long, David and his men are in and out, back and forth with the various shepherds, making sure that everything is well.

One man in the area seems to be particularly wealthy. Hebrew speakers can see where this is going, because the man’s



name, “Nabal”, is the Hebrew word for “fool”, or one who is senseless.

At any rate, near the end of the sheep-shearing season, David sends a small group of about 10 men to Nabal’s estate. They ask for anything he has “on hand”, knowing full well that with four thousand head of livestock who’ve just been shorn (and are presumably just about to give birth), well, there are plenty of liquid assets around. David’s men remind Nabal that had they not been there to secure those assets, he’d have a lot less on hand.

Nabal, however, treats David’s men – and by extension, David – with contempt. “David? Never heard of him. He’s nothing. He’s nobody...”

And for some reason, something in David snapped when this happened. When his men report the treatment that they’ve received from this Fool, David gathers 400 soldiers and heads out to Carmel, where he intends to murder Nabal and his family.

This is the same David we saw last week, by the way: the one who was relying on God to avenge the wrongs that King Saul had brought into his life; the one who was content to wait on God’s justice; the one who expressed deep and abiding faith in God’s provision... Do you remember *that* David? *That* was a guy who was acting like we want a king to act.

And, unfortunately for Nabal, *that* David was nowhere to be seen. Instead, we see a hot-blooded, angry, calculating man bent on destruction, revenge, and murder... In other words, the David of I Samuel 25 is acting a great deal like King Saul has been acting.



¹There is, however, an interruption. Nabal’s shepherds do an end-around and

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go behind their boss's back to his wife, a woman named Abigail. They tell her what David's men did for them all winter, and they inform her of Nabal's callous treatment of their protectors. Without her husband's knowledge, Abigail prepares a feast for David and his men. She whips up a party platter that includes 200 loaves of bread, 5 roasted sheep, and piles of grain, raisins, figs, and wine. She rushes out to meet David, and when she does so, she apologizes for her husband's foolishness. Then, she issues a word of prophecy about David. Listen for the Word of the Lord in 1 Samuel 25:

"Please forgive your servant's presumption. The Lord your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the Lord's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. When the Lord has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the Lord your God has brought my lord success, remember your servant."

Essentially, she says, "Look, David, you are a good man.

You are called by God; wrapped in God's plan, God's love, and God's purposes. You are doing what God wants you to do; God is protecting you already. If you visit this punishment on Nabal, you will do evil; you will depart from God's best for you and disqualify yourself as a moral leader for the people of Israel."

And, just like that, David snaps to his senses. He blurts out, "Wow, thanks! I really needed to hear that. You've saved me from myself, and I'm grateful." And just as Abigail had said that God was acting in and through David's life, now it's David's turn to recognize the hand of God in Abigail's actions and words. Listen:

David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak."

Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request."

When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king. He was in high spirits and very drunk. So she told him nothing at all

until daybreak. Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone. About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died.

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Praise be to the Lord, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal's wrongdoing down on his own head."

Then David sent word to Abigail, asking her to become his wife. His servants went to Carmel and said to Abigail, "David has sent us to you to take you to become his wife."

She bowed down with her face to the ground and said, "I am your servant and am ready to serve you and wash the feet of my lord's servants." Abigail quickly got on a donkey and, attended by her five female servants, went with David's messengers and became his wife.

And, as you heard, Abigail went home and explained what she's done to her husband. And whereas the truth enlivened David, it actually killed Nabal. Once more, David sees not just human history, but the hand of the Lord at work. He senses that it's a good idea to have a truth-teller around, and so he marries

Abigail, and she becomes a trusted confidante of the man who would be king. After all, she had prevented him from compromising his integrity and his very purpose in life. David was quick to recognize that Abigail had empowered him to be more faithful to his God, his calling, and his community than he might have chosen to be on his own.



²Our New Testament reading contains much the same story. Peter had heard a clear word from God regarding the inclusion of Gentile believers in the community of the Church; he had supported the expansion of the body of Christ and had in fact acted toward these “outsiders” with grace and acceptance. He did all of that – until the pressure from the hard-line conservative Christians tempted him to act in a fearful and exclusionary fashion. He starts to treat

them as second-class members until the Apostle Paul shows up and opposes him publicly. Paul’s aim here is not to shame Peter, nor to win an argument in which everyone comes to agree that Paul’s a better debater than Peter. Paul calls Peter out by saying, “Look, Peter, you are better than this. You *know* the truth, for crying out loud. Keep your integrity, and preserve the power of your witness.”



There has been a lot in the news lately about the phenomenon known as “confirmation bias”. As you may know, this refers to “the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately

less consideration to alternative possibilities.” (Wikipedia) If you want to see this in action, bring up “gun control” or “tax and spend” in any conversation, and watch how people filter reality –

² *Paul Rebukes Peter* (Guido Reni), 1609

or in some cases create what we now call “alternative facts” – to demonstrate how any sane, right-minded person must obviously agree with them. Confirmation bias is simply our tendency to hear what we want to hear and to surround ourselves with people who are willing to tell us exactly what we want to hear.

Who saves you from that? Who does the opposite of that for you?

That is to say, do you have anyone in your life who is not content to simply tell you how wonderfully correct you are, but who instead calls you to be a better self than you currently are?

Now, pay attention to me. This is important. I am *not* sending around a sign-up sheet asking “Who wants to be an Abigail or a Paul, and go out telling people what’s wrong with their lives and where they need to improve?” I’m not encouraging any self-appointed prophets to go out and straighten out the political views, solve the personal problems, and rectify the incredibly poor financial decisions of the people around them.

I am asking, in some ways, the opposite question. Who will you trust enough to invite into your life so that you might know more of the truth about yourself? How are you designing relationships so that when you need to hear the truth, there is someone who is close enough to speak it to you?

Our natural tendency is to surround ourselves with sycophants – so-called “yes men” who tell us exactly what we want to hear about ourselves and the world.

The problem is that these people disappear when times get tough and leave you to wallow in your own mess. We need someone who will love us enough to tell us the truth. We need people in our lives with whom we can be honest so that our integrity – our moral compass – is protected.

Some of you know that every other Wednesday morning at 7 a.m. I sit with a group of seven other pastors in the room back there. You might think that all we do is drink coffee and laugh. Some days, you'd be right to think that. But on our best days, we allow ourselves to talk about the stuff that really matters. We give each other permission to ask difficult questions. We trust each other's perceptions. We don't all agree theologically, politically, or socially. But we love and trust each other, and rely on each other to be honest reflections of ourselves.

A few of you might say, "Hey, who needs a group like that? I've got a spouse who does that for me." And if that's how your life is, that's great. Sharon and I have found that sometimes we are too close to each other or to the situation to be objective enough to tell the truth in this way.

In recent years, I've made a habit of spending regular time with a few people in a one-on-one context wherein I've been given permission to ask some important – and sometimes intrusive – questions. These are people who don't want to stay where they are, and think that having someone like Pastor Dave interrupt their lives from time to time might be a good thing.

My point is this: David was an incredible man of God. For a long time, it was obvious that God was going to use him in some very significant ways. But in his life, as in mine, there were landmines and potholes. Every single day, David's anger, pride, lust, or insecurity sought to get the best of him. Every single day presented David with choices that provided a tremendous opportunity either strengthen or undermine his witness; to enlarge or diminish his integrity; to accentuate or compromise his effectiveness for the greater good.

David needed to let someone into his life so that he might be protected from himself. And on that day, in the wilderness, that person was a woman named Abigail.

I need to let someone into my life so that I might be protected from myself.

So do you.

Your task for this week is simple: ask yourself if what I've said this morning about David is true. See if you think it might be true about me. And consider whether it applies to you.

And then?

Well, then you act. Who tells you the truth – even when the truth is the last thing that you want to hear? What, if anything, needs to change in your life so that you are more likely to be open to relationships like this? How can we help you get there?

In light of the controversy surrounding the recent Presidential Order concerning immigration and refugees, I offered the following comments in the context of our morning prayer time:

I suspect that many of you were anticipating that I might say something in the sermon about the political firestorm that is brewing as a result of the fact that the President of the United States of America has issued an executive order that severely restricts immigration from seven war-torn, predominately Muslim nations, suspends all refugee admission for 120 days, and bars all Syrian refugees indefinitely.

Some of you may have been disappointed that I made it all the way through a sermon which seems to be focused on a person who is called to greatness and rooted in goodness who is tempted to act in a way that is beneath his faith and contrary to his God.

Others of you may have been relieved that I didn't get all political in a message.

The bottom line is this: if you were waiting until today to hear me say something about the call of the church to advocate for the last, the least, the lost, the little, and the dead; if you are still wondering what I think about the response that Christians ought to have to those who are running for their lives; if you're not sure what I believe about what the Scriptures have to say about welcoming the stranger and caring for those who bear the image of God... then, well, I've been doing it wrong for 23 years.

This is not the hour for a political meeting or a policy strategy session. This is the time for us to stand in prayer and solidarity with those who are vulnerable; to ask God's blessings of wisdom and discernment and prudence in the lives of those who have been tasked with leading our nation; and to ask God's mercy on us as we, who have so much, must now choose what to do with it.

I have printed out a copy of a statement issued by the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), J. Herbert Nelson. I've met J. Herbert on several occasions, the first of which was in the city of Juba, South Sudan, on a day in which I had been tasked to be the preacher in a United Nations "Protection of Civilians" camp housing 35,000 internally displaced people. It was overwhelming... mile after mile of people who had been driven from their homes by ethnic or political terror – clutching to what remained of their lives in structures made from plastic tarps and bamboo sticks. J. Herbert was on his way to the camp that I just left – and I cannot imagine a place on earth that is closer to the despair of hell than that camp. I would encourage you to read that letter.

I would encourage you to read Matthew 25, about the care for "the least of these"; and Leviticus 19, about our charge to deal well with the poor, the foreigner, and the refugee; and Luke 10,

about knowing who is your neighbor and how to treat that neighbor.

I'm not here to drive you to any particular action or political strategy. You, as a congregation, pay me to encourage you to read and respond to the Word of God. So I'm doing what you asked me to do – pushing you, encouraging you, inviting you to take the words of Jesus seriously. This stuff about loving neighbor, exposing ourselves to risk, walking with the most vulnerable – I'm telling you, it's not my idea. I learned it from Jesus. Pay attention to him! May God have mercy on us because we do so – or fail to do so – at our own peril.