

Camping with Abigail  
1 Sam 25: 2-42  
July 14, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B Bailey, preaching

We make choices every moment of the day about how we will act and interact with others. Sometimes our choices are driven by our fears; sometimes our choices are influenced by our emotions. Our best choices are made in an effort to reflect the wisdom and likeness of God. Our biblical story today highlights three characters and the choices they made; it is my hope that reflecting on their story might influence our own and the choices we make each day.

Perhaps it is a stretch as we consider our “summer vacation” biblical characters to think about Abigail as a camper in the traditional sense of the word, or maybe she is the quintessential camper, living out on the land with her family and flocks. As a life-longer camper I have learned that there is a wisdom to this form of living that makes the difference between a positive, life-giving experience and a horrible, never-will-I-do-that-again sort of time. Abigail seems to know much more than how to manage a traveling household and stake a tent, although I am pretty sure she could do that too.

So, let’s remind ourselves of the story! Abigail is married to Nabal, who after allowing his nomadic herders to tend his sheep in far off pastures, calls them back to camp in order for their annual shearing, which would also include a festival celebration. We are told he is “surly”; in some translations, “mean.” Meanwhile, David, who’s men have been protecting the shepherds camped out in the fields with the flocks, sends some of his men to share Nabal’s feast, thinking it was just reward for keeping them safe. Of course, when they arrive, Nabal pretends to be

ignorant of their help, questions David's power to ask anything of him, and sends them off, empty-handed, without the obligatory payment for not harming his men or sheep.

Why does Nabal act this way? It's interesting to think about. Some people think they operate independently in the world, as if nothing or no one helped them to achieve what they have. We talk about "pulling oneself up with one's boot straps" (not that that image has relevance anymore) or "going it alone". But how independent are we, really? Our very lives are predicated on our parents' lives; our DNA is shared with others. It is more accurate to say that we are inter-dependent than independent; could really and truly "make it" entirely on your own?

But Nabal wants to deny David's men any reward for protecting his sheep and shepherds; he wants to protect his arrogance and pretend he does it all on his own. And so, he makes the choice to send David's men away, to continue to live the fallacy that he doesn't need any one else.

David, however, is less than pleased. His men return and tell the story of Nabal's refusal and David reacts with emotion and begins to plan violence. "Strap on your swords!" David cries, arming his men with the intent to return to Nabal's tribe and slaughter them all. David somehow rationalizes that Nabal's rebuff justifies slaughter. His response is charged with emotion as he makes every effort to consolidate power in an effort to become king. He'll "show" Nabal what it's like to be unprotected! While Nabal acted out of arrogance, David prepares to act out vengeance. Both responses center around the ego needs of these men. Both need to appear strong, independent, in control of themselves and each other. Both men act in anger, seeking a justice that would only serve themselves.

Which is why Abigail presents such a stark contrast. One of David's men, knowing Abigail's heart, slips away to warn her of the impending massacre. Abigail shifts into high gear, organizing food and drink, animals and transportation, sending them off before she sneaks away with Nabal knowing. It is *Abigail* who meets David on this way to kill Nabal; *Abigail* who pleads for the right to speak with David, and *Abigail* who offers their riches to David's men in payment for their faithfulness.

Abigail could have chosen to defend Nabal. She could have tried to explain and justify Nabal's response. Or, Abigail could have moved over to David's side and risen against her foolish husband. (The text suggests that "Nabal" means "fool") But Abigail chooses to stand between them, to think clearly, to act calmly, to exercise her own wise power, negotiating for the life of both. Abigail becomes the wise prophet here, predicting David's rise to power if he can control his response, if he can appreciate her wisdom, if he can reflect God's mercy, the mercy he will need to receive himself. Abigail saves Nabal and David, each from themselves, in a reflection of God's wisdom and grace.

How are we called to be actors of wisdom and mercy in the conflicts that arise around us? In our families? In our church? In our community? And in the world? All too often our first response is *not* our best! I told one of you this week that I have an imaginary snarky email file! When a student asks me a ridiculous question, I sometimes actually write an equally ridiculous answer but then delete it, just so I can get that first response out of my system! For example, the student who is absent writes an email that reads, "I wasn't in class today." (yeah, obviously) "Did I miss anything?" The email I would love to send back would read, "Dear Student, Did you

miss anything? Of course not! Because you were not here, we were at a loss as to what to do so we just sat quietly with our hands folded and waited for you to come!” I mean, really?!

Thankfully, I have restrained myself from sending these---so far—but you get my drift. The first thing that comes out of our mouths is not always the wisest, kindest, most Christ-like response. We are human, after all. We get frustrated, confused, angry, hurt; we feel unheard or disrespected. But the first response need not be the communicated response. And when it is it need not be the *only* response. Sometimes the words slip out. Sometimes what should remain an “inside our head” thought becomes spoken words or even actions. Like Nabal....like David. But we would do well to be like Abigail...to remain thoughtful and strong, clear and courageous, wise and compassionate....with each other, with our family members and friends, with our neighbors, and in the world.

Maybe Nabal was right in thinking David was taking advantage of him, but refusing food to people who have served you, knowingly or not, was a great offense as well as a potential life-threatening condemnation. Maybe David was right in thinking that Nabal took advantage of him but arming his men and intending to kill Nabal’s family and flocks was a harsh and violent reaction.

There is always another way to be in a situation; there is always another tone to take, words to say or not say, another spirit to convey. Abigail reminds us that even in the height of conflict there is another choice: the choice of reflecting God’s steadfast love and mercy and wisdom, all of which lead not to death but to life. This week when someone or something “gets your goat”, “pushes your buttons”, “rubs you the wrong way”, stop and think about the choices you can make. And then make the one that most reflects the life, love and spirit of our God.

