

The Fool and the Furious

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Samuel 25

As I meditated on 1 Samuel 25 this week, I found myself thinking about bighorn sheep. Bighorn sheep. They're called that because males of the species have really big horns. They can be up to a foot in diameter at their base, they can weigh up to 30 pounds and they curl over and come down to a point. They are large animals. Males weigh up to 300 pounds. This week I found myself thinking of nature videos which show two male big horn sheep vying for dominance in the herd. You've see those videos, right? Two males stand on a mountainside in the early spring. They're staring each other down. They snort and steam comes out their nostrils. Finally, they take a little run toward each other, they raise up on their hind legs and they bring their heads together in a mighty crash that echoes through the valley.

It's a thing men do. I don't know if it's how we're wired, or if it's how we are conditioned, and I know that women are capable of the same types of behavior, but throughout history when men are provoked they snort, rear up on their hind legs, and crash into each other. Maybe it's a couple of drivers on the highway and letting a little driving disagreement escalate into road rage which has them weaving in and out of traffic. Maybe it's Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr letting a personal slight turn into a deadly duel. There is a stubbornness and a pride in men, and in all of us, that can cause us to butt heads.

In our passage, the two bighorn sheep are named Nabal and David. How is it that these two men come into conflict with each other? Well like so many conflicts, it starts because they are neighbors. David and his men have been hiding out in the wilderness near Nabal's Ranch. Nabal is a rich landowner from the area. He has flocks and herds and land and servants, but this abundance has not made him wise and generous; it's made him surly and mean. David's men, all 600 of them, have been living in the area, hiding from Saul. They have been excellent neighbors. They haven't got into fights with Nabal's shepherds. They've stayed out of the way. They haven't taken anything. They've protected Nabal's employees from the bad actors who tend to roam the wilderness – bandits, marauders and the like.

So when the harvest comes, David sends some men to ask Nabal if he wouldn't mind sharing some of the bounty of his harvest with his tired men. Nabal doesn't just say no, he insults him. 'David?! Isn't that that fellow who rebelled against his master. Isn't that the upstart nobody who defied Saul? No. I don't think I will be sharing anything with ... what was his name again? Derek, Doug, Ding-Dong... Oh that's right... David.'

David hears about the insult and he starts to snort like a bighorn sheep looking for a fight. "Strap on your swords boys," he growls, "Lock and load. We've got some business to take care of." David sets out for Nabal's house with 400 men, 400 battle-hardened men. Each of them has a sword that's clean and sharp.

David is furious. Verses 21 and 22 show David muttering about what a fool Nabal is. You can tell he's mad because David swears. Or at least he uses coarse language. In our text it says, "May God deal with me severely if I leave one of Nabal's 'men' alive by morning." Only in the Hebrew he doesn't call them men. The word 'men' in our text is a translation of a coarse Hebrew idiom. The King James Version actually translates what David says literally, and it's so coarse that I'm not comfortable saying it from the pulpit. Let's just say that instead of calling them men, he calls them 'those who urinate against a wall,' though the sense of the Hebrew is coarser than that. So the two bighorn sheep are about to come together. Nabal has trash-talked David. And now David, snorting and angry, has reared up on his hind legs and he's about to come smashing down on Nabal.

Let's step back for a moment and examine this situation. Remember I said that in the David stories, there is a contrast between two ways of life: There's the way of the clenched fist: a way of fear and anger and retribution and holding on to what you have. There's also the way of the open hand: the way of faith and trust and generosity and hope.

Nabal is definitely living in the way of the clenched fist. Not only is he a fool, there is not a generous bone in his body. He is surly and mean and he's doesn't like to share. In verse 11 you can see him clenching his fists around his stuff: It literally says: 'Why should I take my bread, and my water and my meat that I have slaughtered for my shearers and give it to these nobodies.' Me, me, me. Mine, mine, mine. Clenched fists.

But here's the thing: it's not just Nabal. David is walking the way of the clenched fist too. We called this sermon series The Imperfect Anointed and it's partly because of passages like this one. David may be the chosen one of God, but he is far from perfect. In the first part of this passage, there is no generosity or hope or patience in him; he is driven by rage and vengeance and he's using coarse language. David's fists are tightly clenched, clenched around the hilt of his sword, and he's about to spill blood. He's going to kill Nabal and a lot of other people besides – Nabal's innocent servants.

It's so different from how David behaved last week! In the passage Kristy preached on last week, David was completely open-handed. He had Saul dead to rights in the cave, his men urged him to take vengeance, but David said no. His hands were open with grace and mercy and peace, even for his enemy. Not here. And that despite the fact that Nabal's offence against David isn't even as serious as Saul's! Nabal isn't chasing him around the desert trying to kill him; it's just an insult. Yet somehow this time David loses it; he clenches his fist and goes all in on vengeance.

If the story was left to these two men with the clenched fists it would have ended badly. Fortunately for David, there is someone else in this story who is living by the way of the open hand, and that's Abigail. Abigail opens her hands in generosity; she loads up her donkeys with a lavish feast for David's men. Figs and cakes and meat and wine. Abigail opens up her hands by risking her life. David and his men are dangerous. They are an angry grizzly bear, and you don't get in the way of an angry grizzly. For all Abigail knew, she could have been one of the people on David's hit list. And yet she makes herself vulnerable in front of David. Abigail opens her hands in humility. She gets off her donkey and bows before David, she literally lays herself down between the fool and the furious man as a way to calm the situation and prevent evil.

Those are wonderful openhanded things that Abigail does, but they are not the most important thing Abigail does. When it comes to snapping David out of his fury, the most important thing that Abigail does is remind him of the presence of the Living God.

Here's something I noticed this week. At the beginning of the story, when he's mad and gathering his men to fight, does David ever refer to God or consult him? I'll save you the trouble of looking. In the first 22 verses David only references God once, and that's in verse 22 where he uses God's name as part of his curse: "God help me if I don't kill every one of those so and so's." The word for God there is Elohim. It's not the covenant name of God, Yahweh; it's the generic word for God. So when the Bible talks about other gods, or the gods of the pagan nations it uses the word Elohim. When David says, "God help me if I don't kill those so and so's" it's just an expression; it's not real attention to the living God.

Abigail is the one who shows up and snaps David out of his clenched-fist fury by reminding him of the presence of his covenant Lord. Because after she bows at David's feet, Abigail preaches a sermon. She preaches a sermon to David. In that sermon she doesn't talk about Elohim, she talks about Yahweh. She uses the covenant name, the name of the living God, the name David hasn't been using. Incidentally you don't need to know Hebrew to see that. In the pew Bible, every time the covenant name is used it appears as the word LORD in all caps. So if you go to verses 24-31 you will see that when Abigail talks to David she uses the covenant name, and if you count she will use the name of the Lord 7 times.

Abigail looks David in the eye and says, "David you are the LORD's chosen. David the LORD will make you a dynasty. David, you don't need to do this – the LORD will take care of your enemies. David don't shed innocent blood – vengeance belongs to the LORD." As she preaches her sermon, David stops muttering, his eyes are opened and his hands slowly unclench. And what are the first words out of his mouth when Abigail finishes talking? "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel who has sent you to meet me." David uses the covenant name again. And for the first time in this story he sees the hand of God working in his life through

Abigail, so he loosens his grip on his sword, he unclenches his fist. He turns away from vengeance and towards mercy.

It strikes me that what Abigail does for David here is exactly what every preacher who stands in this pulpit tries to do for you every Sunday. Every Sunday we come here after a week of our stuff, and we get here, and for most of us, our fists are clenched. The worries and pressures of life have got us tightly wound, myself included. And my job, or the job of whoever's preaching that day, is to do for you what Abigail did for David, to remind you of the living God, to remind you that you belong to him, to remind you that he is holding you in his open hand, and that he will carry you into the future. And if we preachers and worship planners do our job, like David, your hands will loosen, your hearts will open to the Spirit.

And then maybe you will go out into the world with your hands open. Which is so important because this world is full of clenched fist people, right? There are so many people storming through the world like David, muttering to themselves and ready to take matters into their own hands. And we open handed people can be like Abigail to them. We can stand between the foolish and the furious. We can speak the name of the LORD. Tell them that there is a living God who loves them, who holds the future, a God who has sent his Son to save them, a God of amazing grace. And who knows, with the Spirit's help, some of these furious hands will unclench and some of these foolish hearts will open to the LORD.

All of this points back to Jesus of course, who else. Jesus who came to a world full of fools and furious men, Jesus who stood in the midst of them to preach a word of life and hope, Jesus who laid himself down and made himself vulnerable to save us. Jesus who didn't just come to preach to us, but who, also like Abigail, came to give us a feast.

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