

The Shadow

1 Samuel 25:1-35

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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August 20, 2023/Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

We've spent a good chunk of the summer in the book of Genesis, looking at characters like Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau and Isaac.

We've looked at the ways in which their stories tell the human story, and about the little shoots of peace that emerge from the fallen soil of humanity.

Today we're fast forwarding a bit in the Old Testament. As you've heard, we're looking at a story involving David.

David is of the central figures in all of Scripture. He is the shepherd boy who slays the giant, the poet who would write nearly half of the Psalms, the youngest of Jesse's sons who rises to be king of Israel, and from whose line would eventually come Jesus Christ.

(Jesus is referred to as the "Son of David" nearly twenty times in the gospels.)

David looms large in the bible. But I will begin with a confession: I have never really admired David.

He has his good qualities, to be sure. He has moments of deep devotion, faithfulness, and obedience. The psalms he wrote have given Jews and Christians a language for prayer and worship and repentance that is unmatched.

But he also comes across as impulsive, violent, and reckless. Like many powerful men of his time, he accumulated as many wives as he wanted, sometimes by quite nefarious means (as we'll see). He didn't seem like a particularly great father (one of his sons, Absalom, tried to overthrow him).

So, yet again, we have a very conflicted character.

We see this in today's story.

David is not yet king and is kind of roaming around the land with his men. He expects to receive hospitality and welcome from a certain Nabal from Carmel. He's treated Nabal's people and flocks well when their paths intersected in the past. The favour should surely be returned.

When it isn't — when Nabal basically says to David, "Who do you think you are? Get lost! — David flies into a violent rage.

He tells his men, four hundred strong, to strap on their swords. David is hungry for vengeance, and the blood is going to flow.

One of Nabal's servants gets wind of the trouble brewing. And this is where it gets even more interesting. Instead of going straight to Nabal — instead of saying, war is coming, get ready to defend yourself — he goes to Nabal's wife Abigail.

He's quite bold with her. He essentially says, "Your idiot husband is about to bring disaster upon us all. David actually treated us quite well when we were out in the field near them. And Nabal has treated him very poorly. No one can talk to him! You have to do something."

Abigail doesn't contradict him. Which is also interesting. She just gets to work. She prepares a feast and orders it to go. She's going to try to head off this crisis with pre-emptive hospitality. And she does it all behind her husband's back.

She meets David on the road and discovers that his rage has not subsided. He's not going to leave a single man alive.

Abigail pleads for David to accept the gifts she has brought with her, and begs that there be no bloodshed, asking to take Nabal's blame herself.

She pumps David's ego a bit, talking of the dynasty in his future, describing David as sinless and divinely protected. She urges David not to take on the guilt of this violence.

And because of her actions, David calls off his threat and sends Abigail home in peace.

Abigail is the hero of the story.

Even though David is clearly described as being in the right here, and it is Nabal's actions that set the whole story in motion, there is nothing praiseworthy about David's hunger for revenge.

Abigail is the one who makes peace.

We didn't read all the way to the end of 1 Samuel 25. The story ends with Abigail returning home to find Nabal hosting a lavish banquet (like "that of a king," the text says), drunk out of his mind.

In the morning, when he's sobered up, Abigail tells him what she did. Nabal's heart "failed and became like a stone." Ten days later, he's dead.

David sends word to ask Abigail to be his (third) wife and she agrees.

Abigail would later bear him one of his nineteen sons, Chileab. And that's about all we know about Abigail and her son.

So, that's the story. What can we learn?

I don't often have three-point sermons, but three things jump out at me from the story. I think we can learn something from David, something from Abigail, and a broader truth about justice, vengeance, and God.

First, I think from David, we can learn something important about honesty and self-awareness. We learn this mostly because David offers us a negative example (at least in this story).

This week, I came across the following passage from Tomáš Halík (a Roman Catholic priest from the Czech Republic):

When we are unable to recognize our own *shadow*, that dark side of our own nature that we ourselves consciously reject, then we often dispose of it by means of a projection mechanism. We attribute our unacknowledged bad characteristics and faults to others—and there we are able to do battle with them (although actually with ourselves without realizing it!).

Whenever we hate someone, or someone irritates and annoys us... let us look at them as in a mirror. It is often what we can't stand in them that reminds us of ourselves; it is an irritating and unpleasant, albeit important, reminder of a displaced truth: That's what we are like!¹

David's shadow, his dark side, is on full display here. What he hates in Nabal are some of the very characteristics that he will later reproduce in his own life.

Nabal exhibits a careless disdain for others, a desire to play the big man, an abuse of power, and a sneering contempt for those who come to him in a posture of deference.

David will later exhibit all of this (and worse) when he is king, in his treatment of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11).

He takes the woman he wants (he doesn't ask, this time) and arranges for her husband to be killed in battle to cover up his adultery and abuse. David is the king, and he will do what he wants.

To David's credit, he repents when the prophet Nathan exposes him. He writes Psalm 51 which contains some of the most moving language of repentance in Scripture.

But David has his shadow side. Aside from the most famous of his sins with Bathsheba, his impulsive, reactionary hunger for revenge runs completely counter to Jesus' teachings.

We should learn from this. We, too, have our shadow sides.

And we live in a cultural context that is reactive, and eager to judge. We may not strap on our swords and prepare for literal battle, but we are often quite eager to metaphorically cut to pieces those who don't share our politics or ideologies or who we imagine representing a threat to what we, the good, the pure, and the right hold dear. We need to be aware of this, and to model a different way.

Second, from Abigail we can learn the importance of creative disruption, of interrupting the tit for tat reciprocity of violence for violence that our world runs on.

¹ Tomáš Halík, trans. Gerald Turner, *I Want You to Be: On the God of Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 123.

We need as many examples of this as we can get.

On Friday night, Naomi and I watched a movie called Pig.² I'm going to spoil it for you if you haven't seen it, so if you want to watch it, plug your ears for the next few minutes.

Nicholas Cage plays Rob, a renowned chef turned hermit living in the woods outside of Portland, Oregon with his beloved pet pig.

(Having grown up on a pig farm, it was a bit difficult for me to imagine the words "beloved," "pet," and "pig" going together, but I had read an interesting review of the film, so I pressed on!)

Rob's wife has died, and he now spends his days far from the hustle of the elite culinary world. He spends time hunting for truffles in the forest with his pig and sifting through memories of his wife.

He makes his living selling these truffles to a certain Amir who brings them back to the city for the elite chefs to use in their creations.

One day, some thugs come to Rob's cabin. They beat him up and steal his pig.

Eventually we learn that it is Amir who has sold Rob out, and that Amir's father Darius (a kingpin restaurant owner) has had the pig stolen (presumably for his truffle-finding prowess).

The stage is set for violence. Will Rob fly into a rage and rescue his pig?

Well, no. What he does is prepare a meal. The same meal that he served to Darius and his wife (who lies dying in a bed after a suicide attempt), years ago, way back when he was still an elite chef in the city.

He serves his enemy. He makes a meal instead of seeking revenge. Darius is reduced to tears, and the truth comes out.

It's a refreshing change from typical Hollywood fare where the good guys are always getting their revenge on the bad guys.

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11003218/>

We need stories like this to inspire us and to remind us that there are alternatives to violence.

We need stories that center the peacemakers so that we can be inspired to find creative ways to do the same.

Finally, I want to end a broader truth about justice, vengeance, and God.

To do this, I want to return to the Mondays I spend at the jail. I often worry that I weary people with too many stories from this context, but enough of you have spoken to me expressing appreciation for these stories, that I will press on.

At a recent bible study, we were discussing the challenge of forgiveness. The consensus seemed to be that it was an unreasonable demand.

If you had seen what I've seen, you wouldn't forgive either... If you'd seen your friend murdered... your stepdaughter raped... yeah, it all sounds good, but some things you can't forgive. And God's not stepping in so sometimes you got to make it right.

I watched one guy in particular wrestle through this. Like David in our story today, he was practically vibrating with rage. *I wanna believe in a God who makes things right, but what if it's just a bunch of stories in a book... what if nobody ever makes it right. Then it's on me.*

Another inmate looked at him and said, "Have you ever prayed that God would take revenge for you?" He looked up. "No," he replied. "Well," the second inmate said, "maybe you should try... who knows, maybe God takes the guy out in a car accident and saves you a few years in the pen."

I pondered that comment for a few seconds. Suffice to say that praying God would take out an enemy so we wouldn't have to hadn't shown up during any prayer time that I could remember in church.

"So, can we pray that?" the first guy wanted to know. "Can you pray that God would take revenge on my enemies? That's my prayer request today."

I paused, before answering. Was I really about to pray that God would act like some kind of proxy hit man? This felt like crossing a line of some kind.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said, “I’ll pray for justice but not revenge. You ok with that?” Vibrating guy looked at me with half a grin. “Yeah, sure. But I know what I mean by ‘justice.’”

“That’s fine,” I said. “We all have our own versions of justice in our heads; I’ll just pray that God will make what is wrong, right.” He nodded and looked away.

And so, I prayed.

Dear God. There are terrible things done in our world. To us and by us. To those we care about. Make it right. We need some justice. Take it out of our hands. Deliver us from evil. Amen.

I meant what I prayed. We do need some justice. We do need to be delivered from the terrible things done to us and, sometimes, by us.

And, perhaps most importantly, we need vengeance to be taken out of our hands. We can’t be trusted with it. David couldn’t. Rob couldn’t. And you and I can’t.

Imagine if David had acted more like Isaac last week, who just kept moving on whenever one of his wells was blocked by the Philistines.

What if, instead of strapping on his sword for war and vowing not to leave a man alive, he had said, “I believe my cause is just, I believe I have been mistreated by Nabal, but I will leave vengeance to God for God alone knows every human heart, and God alone can be trusted not to turn vengeance into something self-serving.

What if we were to say something like this every time we find ourselves longing for revenge?

In Romans 12:18-19, we read these words:

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’

We may shy away from words like “Leave room for the wrath of God.” “Wrath” is such an ugly word, and we don’t want to think God has that in him.

But I would submit that this is something of a privileged position to hold. The guys in jail remind me of this. When I hear what some of them have endured and some of what they have done, I think, there are some things in this world that are deserving of wrath, and of judgment.

But not from us. Our task is to live peaceably with all, as far as it depends on us. It is to creatively disrupt the system, to not buy into the myth that violence is fine as long as it’s the good guys who are using it.

(Because, as we’ve seen throughout the summer, who exactly are the “good guys?” We all have our shadows.)

Our task is also to leave room for God’s justice and to trust that God will indeed deal justly with all.

So, may God help us, like Abigail, to choose the path of peace. May God help us to acknowledge our shadows and to always leave room for the justice and the mercy of God.

Amen.

