***“Who Am I?”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 21, 2024*

*based on 1 Samuel 25:2-19, 23--34; I Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23*

I want to begin with a joke from the Lutheran mid-west. It’s about Ole and Lena. Ole had just gotten a car that had Blu-Tooth. He was so excited that on the way home he called Lena to tell her about his new purchase. He said, “Lena, I’m calling you from my new car.” And she says, “Don’t use your cell phone in the car, Ole, they’ll see you and give you a ticket.” Ole said, “No they won’t. This car has Blu-Tooth. I got both my hands firmly on the wheel.” Lena says, “That’s great Ole, but please be careful. I got the radio on and their saying that there’s a nut going the wrong way on the freeway.” And Ole says, “One nut? There are hundreds.”

Well, everyone in the world needs someone in their life who will try to protect them, even if what they need the most is someone to protect them from themselves.

That is at the heart of the long story from the Hebrew Testament we had read for us this morning. It’s a story about David and it’s a story about us – there’s also a man in it named Nabal, and there is also Nabal’s wife, Abigail who’s a little like Lena in my lame joke.

Now, for the story to make any sense, you need to know that the name Nabal means, "fool." Silly thing for a mother to name her son, “fool,” but there you have it. It is exhibit A in testifying that the Bible mixes up historical truth with elements of fiction for specific effect.

I mean, naming a character “Fool” is code the Bible uses to say, “Hey, the following story, while about David (a genuine historical figure from Israel’s history) may have elements of fable about it; kind of like George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. Yes, and any way you cut it, the story is true in that it reveals a lot about human nature.

At the time of the story David is not yet a king. He is a traditional warlord – Think of Afghanistan today. He runs a protection racket --

his men offer “protection” to landowners; protection for their animals from wild critters, and protection from other warlords wanting to offer protections.

Anyway, David happens to be in the neighborhood of this rich landowner named Nabal. After protecting him without Nabal’s consent, David sends out a lead party of his servants to set up a dinner – that’s the pay he expects for his services.

*But Nabal answered David’s servants, “Who is David? Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?” So David’s young men … came back and told him all this. David said to his men, “Every man, strap on his sword!”*

*David also strapped on his sword; and about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage. But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal’s wife, about this.*

*Then Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. She loaded them on donkeys and said to her young men, “Go on ahead of me; I am coming after you.”*

*But she did not tell her husband, Nabal.*

That’s where we ended the reading today for brevity’s sake.

Of course, it goes on …

*Abigail, riding her donkey, came down under cover of the mountain, David and his men came toward her and she met them. When Abigail saw David, she alighted from the donkey and fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground. She said, “Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please let your servant speak in your ears. My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him;*

*Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the LORD will certainly make you a secure dynasty because you are fighting the battles of the LORD; and evil shall* ***not*** *be found in you so long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you to seek your life, [your life] shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the LORD your God ….*

*[So] when the LORD has done to you according to all the good that [God] has planned concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, [you] shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause. And when the LORD has dealt well with you, then remember [me].”*

David said to Abigail, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today . . . from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the LORD the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male.

Great story. It may not surprise you to hear that in short order Nabal has a fatal heart attack and Abigail is suddenly a free-agent and she’s picked up quickly by, guess who?

She’s a real find. She reminds David who he is, and whose he is. Something David needs to know.

There is no reason to act rashly, she insists: "Wake up -- your life is -- bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the lord your God.”

David is reminded that his life is bigger than he thinks. He has purposes to carry out that are larger than his own, which is true for all of us in little and big ways.

Abigail gave David perspective; she took him into the future. Here’s how she did it.

“When you become king,” she is saying, “you surely wouldn't want to remember a day when a petty slight led you to shed buckets of innocent blood."

You know, at our more irrational moments we all need someone to say to us, "Is this really what you want?” Maybe the answer is a resounding yes, or maybe it’s a pitiful, no. Either way, we need to answer that question for ourselves.

David has to ask himself, "Am I at heart a bully and a tyrant?" Surely he was capable of such, but, according to Abigail he was more because his purposes were tied up with the purposes of God.

Terence Publius Afer, a great Roman playwright, made the most important statement in history regarding self-knowledge. He said, "I am a human being; nothing human is alien to me."

This means the following: “I am a human being. As such, I am capable of committing the worst atrocities, I am capable of falling to the most petty indulgences, and also of rising to the most sublime heights of selflessness.“

That’s exactly who we are. Both, at the same time. For bad and also for good.

The part of Jesus’ famous parable about the prodigal son that never fails to arrest me is the part where the young man runs through all of his inheritance and takes the only job he can find as an exile in a foreign land – feeding a man’s pigs.

He loses weight. He loses hope and one day the slop he is feeding the pigs looks good to him and he is tempted to eat it. It is right then that Jesus adds the clincher – he says that at that moment “he came to himself.”

Like David, the young man saw just how far he had fallen. And he was terrified to consider how he might be remembered after he was gone.

This happens to people every single day.

You may know the story of Alfred Nobel. We all know about the Nobel prizes, but not everyone knows that before all that Nobel made a vast fortune through his invention of dynamite -- selling his formulas to governments in order to make weapons. One day Nobel's brother died and one newspaper accidently printed an obituary of Alfred Nobel by mistake.

So, interestingly, Nobel had the unique opportunity to read his own obituary and to see what he would be remembered for. The obit identified him as the inventor of dynamite. It spoke of him as the man who had made tons of money by enabling armies to achieve unthinkable levels of appalling destruction.

Nobel was shocked by this. He had thought of himself as an outstanding citizen, a brilliant scientist, a shrewd man of business, but it was apparent that the world was going to remember him forever as nothing more than a gross merchant of death.

So he took his fortune and he used it to establish awards for achievements in various fields he felt would most benefit humanity for generations. And it is for these Prizes (among them the prize for Contributions to World Peace) that Alfred Nobel is best remembered today.

So, let me make the point that there is a David inside every one of us. It comes out of us at the oddest times. Be sensitive to your restlessness in these months of extreme heat as well as months coming of bleak winter beginning in December. Locked in by extremes, we can get pretty cranky.

Remember, you’re only human. But also remember who and whose you are.

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christians, the great positive thinker of the 1st century says, “Don’t you know that you are God’s temple – God’s spirit dwells in you?”

Paul’s idea is that we can get infinite benefit from waking up to idea that we are precious in value because something of the creator lives in us all.

This is what Abigail was telling David and it is good for all of us to remember.

I feel I have been tested recently by the news of the attempt on the life of our former president. I’ve been pastor here for three years now and I have not exactly hidden how I feel about that man as you well know.

His own niece, Mary Trump, said, “I have known my uncle my whole life and he doesn’t have a single redeeming quality.” I tend to believe her. No capacity for empathy. Zero fellow feeling.

Now, I have no use for violence, especially politically motivated violence, but when I heard he had been injured I have to confess my first reaction was not entirely benevolent, nor full of empathy myself.

Like David, I too need Abigails in my life to confront me, and remind me who I am, what I am capable of, and whose I am. Every minute of every day. I am not Jesus. Far from it.

Let me sum up with this about our nature as humans: As you probably know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, was a member of the Christian resistance to Adolf Hitler. Beginning in 1933 he questioned the allegiance most of his fellow Christians were giving their fascist leader.

In prison for being part of a plot to kill Hitler he wrote the following poem questioning his own allegiance – it’s called, “Who Am I?”

*Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me I would talk to my warden freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really all that which other men say of me, or am I only what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint and ready to say farewell to it all.*

Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.*

It’s good when we remember we’re only human, after all. It can be freeing. And at the same time, it’s also good to remember whose we are.

With Bonhoeffer, we need to ask, "Who am I, this or the other . . . but let’s not dwell there forever. No. Your life is bigger than you know “You are bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God."

Amen