



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
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"Anger: Get Even or Get Over It?" - 1 Samuel 25
Ron Mathieu

This morning we continue with our series: "Facing the Giants", a study of the life of King David. We saw David, a simple shepherd boy surprisingly anointed to be Israel's future king, literally face and slay the giant Goliath.

We've learned of King Saul's jealousy of David, and how Saul continued to pursue David in the wilderness, nearly killing him six times! We learned the importance of true friendship as demonstrated by Jonathan's selfless love and loyalty.

And although he found favor in God's eyes, David has also shown himself to be quite flawed. We watch him exhibit a sense of entitlement that results in the unfair execution of his pastor Ahimelech and 85 others.

But just when we think this "too-full-of-himself stud warrior" is unfit for his future royal role, David also demonstrates incredible honor and mercy and grace by repeatedly refusing to kill his archenemy King Saul when he has the chance.

I don't know about you, but I find it really amazing that the Bible is so real in its depiction of the man who is described as one of God's favorites—a man after God's own heart—who became one of Israel's greatest kings.

David truly is a complex character who exhibits all of the

best qualities of man, and all of the worst as well; which makes our study of him that much richer as we try and understand the nature of God, the nature of man, and how we can learn from the portrait—warts and all.

This lute-playing shepherd boy, who had such a close relationship with God, who gave us the greatest poetry in the Bible (the psalms), who showed such mercy and forgiveness toward his oppressor Saul, was the champion of Israel against Goliath and many larger armies over time, the king who teed up the golden age of Israel's reign and building of the Temple under his son Solomon... is also the same David who was prideful, felt entitled in his arrogance, was easily angered for minor infractions, showed jealousy and lust, committed adultery and even murder—as we'll learn in coming weeks.

So one point I'd like to make this morning is: **We often focus on the finished product.**

We tend to romanticize greatness, to envision the shepherd boy who killed the giant and went on to such greatness.

In so doing, we often miss the process—the journey, the peaks and valleys by which he attained wisdom and greatness and his really close relationship with God.

I mention this up front because this morning, once again, David's on a very slippery character-development slope as he faces the giants of anger and revenge. Let's pick it up in Chapter 25 of 1st Samuel.

1 Then David got up and went down to the wilderness of Paran. 2 There was a man... whose property was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. 3 Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was clever and beautiful, but the man was surly and mean; he was a Calebite.

4 David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. 5 So David sent ten young men; and David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal, and greet him in my name. 6 Thus you shall salute him: 'Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have.

7 I hear that you have shearers; now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing, all the time they were in Carmel. 8 Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your sight; for we have come on a feast day.

Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David.”

Okay, I think I need to pause a second to clarify what's going on here. My wife, Angela, and I just returned from Sicily, birthplace of the Mafia, and you might be thinking, "Is this some kind of shakedown or Mafia protection racket?"

Actually, the Mafia still operates widely in Sicily, extorting many businesses in a way that you're not even aware, kind of like a hidden tax on everything. The only visible evidence we saw was the condition of the roads, as highway funds get siphoned off before the roads are repaired. We'd been driving for an hour and a half on a road and then came upon this:



Fortunately there was barely enough room for our Fiat 500 to pass and I took the picture once across!

But it was no mafia-like protection racket David was pulling. In those days, (and even today with Bedouin shepherds), the wilderness made it easy for rustlers to raid flocks or rob campsites.

So protectors would guard them, and when it came to the time to shear the sheep, the owner would share a portion of the profits for those who protected his shepherds. David, a former shepherd, would have been very aware not only of the value of his

men's services, but also the customary show of appreciation that was fairly expected.

Verse 9 continues: **9** *When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David; and then they waited.* **10** *But Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters.* **11** *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?"*

Try to look at it this way. When you go to a restaurant, you leave a tip. It's not mandated, but a waiter would have every right to be ticked off if he did a good job and nothing was given, since his livelihood depends on tips. Even more so, if he'd gone way out of his way with service...and was insulted and told to buzz off.

12 *So David's young men turned away, and came back and told him all this.* **13** *David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every one of them strapped 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.*

Now I understand getting upset, but David seems to have forgotten the lesson he learned the last time he faced the giant of entitlement. This time he totally loses it and Nabal and his men are going to pay with their lives. We'll get back to the story, but let's pause here and unpack this giant called "Anger".

It totally floors me that this is the same David who was unfairly hunted and nearly killed six times by Saul. This is the

virtuous, patient, gracious, honorable young man we witnessed who cut a piece of Saul's garment rather than his throat.

Last week Pastor Tim talked about how in the wilderness of Engedi, David recovers his perspective and his integrity. He refuses to do what is expedient and self-serving. Something wonderful happened to him in the wilderness. David was a changed man. He'll do what was right. So, what in the heck happened after that?!

In today's passage this same David totally wigs out and because of insults by a boorish man whose name literally means "fool," he's willing to risk his men and his future kingship by killing not only Nabal, but annihilating all of his men as well.

Is there anyone here this morning who has never been angry? That's not surprising. Anger is an absolutely natural emotion that all humans experience. Even God gets angry, and aren't we created in His image?

Anger is a normal response to personal hurt and perceived injustice...and it often can lead to justice and goodness. It's been said that a person who cannot feel anger at evil or injustice is a person who lacks enthusiasm for good.

Sixty years ago, a preacher from Chicago flew to South Korea to minister to American troops fighting in the Korean War. During his daily strolls on the frigid, wintry sidewalks of Seoul, the Rev. Everett Swanson grew increasingly troubled by the sight of hundreds of war orphans living on the streets, abandoned by society.

One morning he saw city workers scoop up piles of trash and toss them into the back of a truck. He watched as the garbage men kicked the piles, passed by some, and loaded others into the truck.

He asked his Korean minder what was happening and was told: "There are orphans who sleep in the trash piles to keep warm. If the pile doesn't move, the kid died in the night and they load the frozen body in the truck with the rest of the trash."

It horrified and angered Swanson, who was haunted because he knew something had to be done, and he vowed to find a way to help them. He raised money to support a Korean orphanage and persuaded Christian Koreans to start new orphanages.

He soon established a unique program that allowed an individual in the Western world to provide Bible-based education, food, clothing, shelter and medical care for a Korean orphan for just a few dollars a month.

Everett Swanson transformed his anger into a ministry called Compassion International. I've been privileged to serve on their Board of Directors for seven years. Today, with your support and that of Christians from 12 other partner countries, Compassion helps more than 1.6 million babies, children and college students in 26 developing countries grow stronger in health, education, income-generating skills—and faith in Jesus.

Today Compassion is the second fastest growing non-profit in the United States. And do you know which is the largest single sponsoring country after the United States? Korea!

So anger, when controlled, can lead to goodness. A person who is angry for: the right reasons, against the right evil or injustice, in the right manner, at the right moment, and for the right length of time...deserves great praise.

When I was a kid my mother used to say, "Ron, never let the sun set on your anger." And I remember telling her "But mom, that's impossible...how do you expect me to stop the sun from setting?"

When we allow anger to burn it can easily turn in another direction that is not good. One writer put it this way: "Getting angry can sometimes be like leaping into a wonderfully responsive sports car, gunning the motor, taking off at high speed and then discovering the brakes are out of order." - Maggie Scarg in *New York Times Magazine*.

When the brakes aren't effectively applied, uncontrolled anger can lead to an even more dangerous giant called "Rage". It often results from the simplest infraction. Think of road rage when, because of something as benign as someone's sloppy driving habits, people actually get into fistfights and even shoot one another!

When people get enraged they frequently say, "I don't know what happened, I totally lost it!" or "I lost my temper!" which points toward the kind of person you are if you can't control anger. You become a loser. You lose credibility, you lose relationship, and you lose the respect not only of others, but if we're honest, our own self-respect as well. This is especially true when we lose our temper with our kids.

Then there's another degree of anger that can be even more disastrous, and sure enough, David just wouldn't be David without confronting yet another giant on his journey, the giant of "Revenge".

The Message translation describes David's escalation from anger...to revenge...in verse 21. David said, "That sure was a waste, guarding everything this man had out in the wild so that nothing he had was lost—and now he rewards me with insults. A real slap in the face! May God do his worst to me if Nabal and every cur in his misbegotten brood aren't dead meat by morning!"

Vengeance is a really tricky emotion. Revenge is often treated by the world with a weird respect and an even bizarre admiration. Some of that may be because the word "vindicate" which means, "to make right" and "vengeance", which is "punishment for a wrong" are closely related.

Hence, the Avengers are popular action heroes. And it's considered clever to say "I don't get mad, I get ____ (even).

Be truthful. Don't you love the repeated line in *The Princess Bride*? "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!"

Revenge is sometimes even called "sweet revenge." Francis Bacon said vengeance is a sort of "wild justice."

That's because taking revenge is right on the raggedy edge of meting out justice.

But did you ever notice God especially cautions us when we're near such raggedy edges?

That's where we're in the most danger of stepping over the line, the edge that marks the end of His way...and the beginning of the world's way.

It's where doing things with excellence can become perfectionism and pride. It's where extreme love can become jealousy. It's where normal physical attraction can turn into lust. And it's that raggedy edge where anger can turn into revenge.

Douglas Horton said, "When seeking revenge, dig two graves... one for yourself."

Now you might say, "But Ron, the Bible says in Exodus 21 'an eye for an eye.' In the Bible God shows vengeance time and again...and we're created in his image, so shouldn't we be allowed vengeance as well?" No!

It's important in our lives and in our faith walk to figure out when God is God and we are not, and we need to understand the difference. Failure to do so is the essence of original sin, the cause of Adam's fall, and it's at the heart of our sinful nature as well.

"Vengeance is mine", says the Lord. But it's a clear boundary that God establishes for our own good; a boundary we should respect and obey because He knows that human vengeance always leads to disaster.

But not so with God! Listen to how David himself describes the nature of God in Psalm 103, and pay special attention to God's anger in the context of the fuller description of God's character:

7 *The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.* **8** *The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* **9** *He*

will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. **10** *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

God is slow to anger. He will not keep His anger forever.

It's true, the Bible does say "An eye for an eye," but Jesus turned that around and said "Forgive as I have forgiven you, and turn the other cheek," for Jesus knew that an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind. But the Bible also makes clear that there is horrific evil in the world. And that although God is slow to anger, (and many don't like to hear this part), vengeance will be His for those who perpetrate evil. There's literally going to be hell to pay!

Lest anyone think that's going to just be a casual trip behind the woodshed, Jesus describes it as a lot worse: He says "There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth,"

And in Matthew 23 he doesn't mince any words:

25 *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.*

33 *"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"*

Seven times He says "Woe unto you!" and the payback is not a pretty picture. I'm here to tell you that God's vengeance will not be "Kumbayah" around the campfire.

Justice will be right beside mercy.

Injustice and evil will be answered with righteous anger. The vintage that He'll trample will be from grapes of wrath. His terrible swift sword will loose fateful lightning. And glory hallelujah: Truth, His Truth, will march on!

We should not feel like evil and injustice will get a pass when we relinquish vengeance to God.

But in this morning's passage David is clueless, and in a rage fueled by an old fool's insult, he's poised to blow the whole deal by taking bloody revenge on Nabal's household.

Enter Abigail, and an amazing thing happens:

23 *When Abigail saw David, she hurried and alighted from the donkey, and fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground.*

24 *She fell at his feet and said, "Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please...hear the words of your servant.*

25 *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;*

26 *"Now then, my lord, ... since the Lord [God] has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal.*

...28 *Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord [God] will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of [God]; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live.*

30 When [God] has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, **31** my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself.

This chapter is all we know about Abigail, but it says a lot! It's generally agreed that she has to be included in any list of the great women in the Bible. She's beautiful. She's wise. She's discerning. She's loyal to her husband and his household, all of whom she saves with her taking quick action. She's humble and diplomatic, and pretty clever in the way she diffuses a crisis that would have destroyed both her family, her friends, her livelihood, and the future king of Israel.

But above else, she's a risk-taker who is willing to put everything on the line if it will bring peace and glory to God.

This is a third point I'd like to make this morning: **Risk-taking is part of peace-making.**

Before Nelson Mandela was arrested in 1962, he was an angry, relatively young man. A year earlier he founded the African National Congresses' military wing, and led a sabotage campaign against the apartheid government of South Africa. Convicted of conspiracy to overthrow the state, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, of which he served 27 years.

Mandela was released in 1991 at the height of escalating civil strife, and he was expected to lead a violent uprising against the LeClerc government. To everyone's amazement he talked about reconciliation and forgiveness and not about revenge,

was elected as South Africa's first black president, abolished apartheid, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Thinking back on that time, Mandela said, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

In our scripture, Abigail knew immediately that her foolish husband Nabal's insults would anger David and bring fatal consequences unless she acted. Keep in mind that women in those days were second-class citizens, and to unilaterally countermand her husband's orders was an unheard-of foul that also carried dire consequences. Women were powerless in Jewish culture. Yet, she stops a war between two very powerful men!

More than courageous, Abigail was wise. Listen to commentator Eugene Peterson's restatement of her message to David:

Abigail says in effect, "Your task, David, is not to exact vengeance; vengeance is God's business, and you are not God. You are out here in the wilderness to find out what God is doing and who you are before God."

"The wilderness is not an experimental station in which you test yourself to find out how strong and resilient you are; it is where you discover the strength of God and God's faithful ways of working in and through your life. Nabal is a fool, but don't you also become a fool. One fool is enough in this story." (First and Second Samuel, Peterson, Westminster Bible Companion, pg. 121)

Abigail's words of wisdom turned David's vengeful blood thirst into blessing!

32 David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! **33** Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand!"

34 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."

35 Then David received from her hand what she had brought him; he said to her, "Go up to your house in peace; see, I have heeded your voice, and I have granted your petition."

See what happened? This is what I really love about the story of King David: He messes up as much as anyone...again and again and again...but his true character, the character God saw in him from the beginning, shines through at times like these.

He humbly receives the wise rebuke of Abigail, thanks her, and thanks God who put her in his path.

This brings me to my final point this morning: **Dispensing good advice is an art; but so is heeding good advice.**

This is a huge factor in facing all our giants, especially those of anger and revenge. Most people are wise after a mistake, wise after a misunderstanding, or a mishap, but not before.

The truth is even godly people can be wrong, can have blind spots, can turn from God

when frightened, or when they feel entitled, when pride gets in the way, and especially when the giant of anger raises its ugly head.

Knowing that, we have to listen for those who speak truth into our lives, often truth we don't want to hear. Honest feedback is crucial to the process of becoming wise.

We should look for cool heads in the middle of our crises, we should strive to have cool heads when our tempers flare, and discern when our anger is just, as opposed to being, well, just anger.

David was affronted because he served and protected but was not shown gratitude. But he overlooked that God had anointed him, had protected him against all odds, had put good people like

Samuel and Jonathan in his path, had blessed him beyond what he deserved, and had forgiven some of the worst sins committed in the Scriptures.

And my friends, we are no better. Imagine if God gave us what we deserve! God has every reason to annihilate us for what we've done and even more for the ingratitude we've shown. But the Good News is that Jesus gave His life on the cross so that no matter what we've done in our lives, no matter how deserving of God's righteous anger and vengeance, no matter how undeserving we are.

Jesus paid the price. He evened the score. And His grace surpasses it all.

Amen? Amen.

Let's pray: Lord we thank You for Your Holy Word and the way it guides us in the face of the giants in life. We ask that You put wise counselors in our path, that You give us wisdom to listen to them, especially when we are angry, and that because we seek to be like You, that our reactions are not in anger and in vengeance, but instead reflect the fruit of Your Holy Spirit...with kindness, and gentleness, and self-control. Amen.

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Note: Ron Mathieu is the Executive Director of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com