

“Making a Way”

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 25:14-18, 23-25, 32-34, 42-43
August 30, 2026

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

As I said, Wilda Gafney hopscotches through this story, only highlighting some of the details. So, let me fill in the blanks a little.

At this point in the larger story of David’s rise to power, he has fled from the court of King Saul after Saul threatened his life, because David had become too popular and powerful. David then operates as the leader of a band of warriors, living in the wilderness, and occasionally hiring out to one town or another for protection or to fight on their behalf. He and his cohort are basically mercenaries.

When the Bible first introduces us to Nabal, we are told that he is surly and mean and that Abigail his wife is beautiful and clever. One feast day David sends some of his men to Nabal seeking hospitality, but they are insulted and turned away. In ancient cultures, not granting hospitality was an ethical violation. Eugene Peterson, in his commentary, points out that sheepshearing time was traditionally a period of festivity and generosity.

David finds out about the insult, and enraged, decides to attack Nabal.

But Abigail hears from one of the servant boys what has happened and she takes action. She doesn’t tell Nabal what she’s going to do. She takes gifts to David and falls down in front of him, imploring him to save her husband and household. In her speech she declares that God’s favor is upon David and he is going to rise to power. And that if he destroys Nabal, he will damage his own reputation and bring blood-guilt upon himself.

David, apparently struck by the beauty and power of this woman, grants her wish and sets aside his rage.

Abigail returns home to find Nabal drunk at his feast. She waits until the next day, when he’s probably suffering from quite the hangover, to tell him what she’s done. Which, of course, is an insult to his honor. Nabal appears to immediately have a stroke and lingers a few days before he dies. Then Abigail seeks after David, who makes her his wife.

Of this story, the Bible scholar David Jobling writes, “The more I read it the more I dislike it.” He finds it a distasteful story in which nobody behaves well. He even dislikes Abigail.

Wilda Gafney says that David is a “thug” and Nabal a mean-spirited man and “abusive husband.” But, unlike Jobling, she takes a different perspective on Abigail. She thinks Abigail is a survivor who has learned how to deal with toxic men. She has learned how to survive in a toxic and violent society. Doing the best she can in this scary situation to save the day, she spares the community violence and creates a future for herself.

Gafney is a Womanist scholar of the Hebrew scriptures. Last week I talked in more detail about what it means to use a womanist lens to interpret scripture. Basically, it is to take the perspective, values, and concerns of women of color, particularly Black women.

A primary concern of womanism is how often for women of color the primary ethical goal is survival. While they might long for liberation or economic justice or to live flourishing lives, so often, because of racial, gendered, and classist prejudices, their primary ethical objective is survival for them and their family and community in toxic, violent situations. So, Abigail is a biblical character that resonates with a womanist focus. She is a woman doing her best to survive and prevent greater harms in a world where she has little power and agency.

The first generation of womanist scholars drew much inspiration from the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, one of the leading luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century. In her classic book *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie G. Cannon, reflecting on Zora Neale Hurston’s fiction, calls attention to one

aspect of Black women's moral agency, what she calls "unshouted courage." Here is how Cannon describes this "stamina in dealing with innumerable incidents of unpredictability:"

'Unshouted courage' is the quality of steadfastness, akin to fortitude, in the face of formidable oppression. . . . It involves the ability to 'hold onto life' against major oppositions. It is the incentive to facilitate change, to chip away the oppressive structures, bit by bit, to celebrate and rename their experiences in empowering ways.

"Meeting difficulties with fortitude and resilience" is a valuable ethical trait. And one I believe we see exhibited here in the Biblical story of Abigail.

One shorthand way to describe that trait is the womanist phrase "making a way out of no way." The novelist Alice Walker seems to be the first to have used that phrase, but it has caught on.

Monica Coleman, a younger generation womanist theologian, took that phrase as the title for her book. Her focus is on how we pursue creative transformation as a form of salvation. Coleman's quote on the cover of your bulletin exhibits aspects of her thinking. That we quest for health and wholeness in communities intentionally focused on those goals, communities that see themselves in a cooperative process with God.

For Coleman, salvation is not an event that was one and done for, but is an ongoing activity of people in cooperation with God. She writes, "We are being saved over and over again, feeling God's continual calling toward survival, justice, and quality of life, using each opportunity to become in higher and more intense forms."

God is constantly calling us to something higher and better. And giving us the tools, the agency, the power to do the work. Which we do not do alone, but in a community, that struggles and creates together so that we might all experience salvation and transformation.

A womanist reflection upon this story of Abigail, invites us to reflect upon the tools we need in order to make a way out of no way in our own time.

As the week began I thought at this point in the sermon I'd draw upon some of the ideas and lessons I learned last weekend attending the National Convergence for Democracy at which I listened to some of the local leaders of mutual aid networks talk about the work they did during Operation Metro Surge. Most of those leaders were women. Many, women of color.

But, then, Dolly Parton died on Tuesday, and I want to spend some moments reflecting upon her life and legacy.

Dolly might have been the last universally beloved figure in American society, equally embraced by White Southern conservatives and queer urban kids of color. As one commentator pointed out, difficult to imagine another person who, upon their death, would receive an outpouring of praise from both Jane Fonda and Donald Trump.

Dolly Parton is clearly an example of someone making a way out of no way and becoming a blessing to the wider world. Obviously, she was not a woman of color, but she did arise from extreme poverty, pretty much as poor and backwoods as a white woman could be. And with creativity, resilience, ambition, and grit, she built herself into a cultural icon and a successful businesswoman.

The beautiful obituary the *New York Times* published said "Her songs spoke to millions, confronting privation and loss even as they radiated possibility and hope." A lovely piece in this morning's *Times* spoke of her as "a Christian who represented for many an idealized style of faith."

But, of course, the reason she is so beloved is not just her songwriting or entertaining persona, but is the kind of wealthy person she became—one who shared immeasurably from what she had. On Instagram, the journalist Hanif Abdurraqib wrote of her, "a good life is one where what you've given outpaces what you've made."

I don't think we even know all that she did and provided money for, as she wasn't inclined to do it all publicly. But what we do know is incredible—the theme park which was created to bring tourists and economic development to one of the poorest regions of Appalachia, the literacy project that mailed one million free books a month to children across the country (our church member Andrew Karre, who is a children's book editor, wrote on Facebook this week that no one single American had done as much for literacy as she did). For decades she contributed to impoverished schools, particularly those in Black communities, buying instruments and uniforms for the school bands. She took the royalties from Whitney Houston's cover of "I Will Always Love You" and donated them to economic development programs in Black communities. And she was one of the primary funders of the Covid vaccine.

Wilda Gafney writes that a core theme of this Biblical story is generosity and hospitality, even if we see their opposites revealed within it. She writes, "While some biblical passages equate wealth with blessing uncritically, these lessons look more deeply at what one does with one's wealth as a measure of character."

And that test Dolly Parton passed. She didn't just make a way for herself with her creativity and ambition, she shared. She gave. And gave well and effectively. And left deep and abiding impacts for good upon the world. That is why she is so beloved, and our nation's flags fly at half-staff for a country music singer.

The story in First Samuel provides a glimpse of some of the harms that can be done when we don't live according to the simple maxim that God wants to share God's life with all of us. The failure to be hospitable, generous, and welcoming so often leads to violence. Grace is required to set vengeance aside and do something different. Something more creative. Thankfully, Abigail imagined another way. As did Dolly.

As kids remind us, "sharing is caring."

So, let's do better. In cultivating basic virtues and practicing generosity and hospitality. In spending and investing with an eye toward justice and doing the most good. Our making should create beauty and mend what is broken.

When we do all of these things, then we make a way out of no way. Together, all of us can not only survive, but we can share in God's life of salvation and blessing.