

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 51:1-17
2 Samuel 11:1-5

Today, we turn to the story of David and Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite. David commits adultery with Bathsheba, and when it proves impossible to trick Uriah into thinking the child who results is his, David goes on to arrange for Uriah's death. After this, David's kingdom is never the same again.

As our story opens David's world can be summarized in one word. It's a word that appears again and again in this narrative. All his kingly power is captured in this one word—"Send." In verse one we read, "David *sent* Joab," the king's men, and the Israelite army into war. The President of the United States has the awesome responsibility of sending young men and women into battle, some of whom will not return. It is the power to send.

In verse 3, David sees an attractive woman, and we read, "*David sent someone to find out about her.*" When he hears about the woman, he "*sent messengers to get her.*" They sleep together and after she conceives verse 6 says, "*David sent this word to Joab: 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.'* And Joab *sent him to David.*" Here is the power of brute force. David sends armies, generals, and women at his whim. This power had been concentrated in David for one reason: so he could effectively lead and defend his nation.¹

There had been a time in David's life—when he was younger—when all that power weighed so heavy on his shoulders that it drove him to his knees before God every day. But now the power seemed normal and David wasn't on his knees quite as often. He's in his late 40s now and he's had the reins of power for a long time. Now it just feels like the way things ought to be. After all, he is King David!

The sense you get from reading the story is that David's life has lost its spark. Listen again to verse one. "*In the spring..., the time when kings go off to battle,* (that's who David was, he was the king) *David sent (General) Joab out with his officers and all [the army of] Israel.*" David, why aren't you out there leading the charge in the spring at the time when kings go off to war? Where is your focus? David sits in his palace in sort of quasi-semiretirement from his illustrious career, bored perhaps and with time on his hands. Does this sound familiar? I've had friends who have made a bundle and retired with millions in the bank while they were still in their forties or fifties. You might think that that would be nirvana: no responsibilities, breakfast in bed, golf every day. But as often as not, they are soon at loose ends: drinking too much, driving their spouses crazy, starved for something meaningful to do. Was that David's situation?

It's late that afternoon, after he gets the latest reports from the front, that David goes up to the top of his palace and peers out over the parapet. Over here in the courtyard, the palace guard is changing. Over here in the street some children are playing their game of Israelites and

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 182-184.

Philistines. As he begins to turn, suddenly he sees on the roof of a nearby dwelling a breathtakingly beautiful young woman in her bath. The Hebrew word order is emphatic: she was “beautiful of appearance very.”

Notice how David sees this woman from his privileged vantage point high atop his palace. Ordinary people down below did not have David’s view from the top of Mount Zion, which was the highest pinnacle in the surrounding area, the strongpoint from which the king could protect and defend. Yet here he was, using that spot to leer into a woman’s boudoir for his own voyeuristic thrills! This spying leads to what amounts to the rape of another man’s wife.

That’s a precarious moment. The moment when you’re up there on top of the world like David was. You will either look up or you will look down. We can look up to God and out at the world as we take our resources to fight his battles in ministry and mission. Or, we can look down at Bathsheba and say, “It’s all about me.” How ironic! David’s glittering success set him up for the downfall of his life. So David sends servants to investigate who this beautiful woman is. He finds out that not only is she married, but married to one of his own officers. He knows how grave an offense it would be to become intimate with her. But David knows her husband is away, and the servants could be counted on for silence. So David sends for her. He sleeps with her and then discards her. Like some rock star or big time athlete or politician, David sends her away after he has used her. “Go away.” But sometime later she sends word to the king, “I am with child.” Even one night stands can have consequences.

Fortunately for David he has power to *send*. He sends word to Joab, “Send Uriah home.” David wants to give Uriah no reason to think he’s not the father of the baby. He wants Uriah to have a little R&R back home with his beautiful wife. But Uriah is such a true-blue soldier that he won’t enjoy the company of his wife while his men are out sleeping in foxholes on the battlefield. David even gets Uriah drunk one night, but Uriah just curls up and falls asleep on the palace floor. David handles this complication by sending a note to General Joab. David tells him to put Uriah on the front lines where the fighting is thickest then withdraw the soldiers and let him be killed. Notice that what began as a naughty little episode of lust has now become a full-blown sex and murder crime. There is no such thing as an innocent little peccadillo. Sin weaves its web and pulls us in deeper and deeper.

After Uriah dies, David waits a while and then does one more “send.” He sends for Bathsheba and marries her. That would seem to be the end of the story. It would seem that the rich and powerful have once more had their way, that David (with his power to send) is indeed in charge in Israel. It would seem so...until we come to the first seven words of the next chapter: “And *the Lord sent* Nathan to David.” Up until now, David has been playing God, but now we see the real God enter the story in the person of Nathan the Prophet. Nathan says, “Oh King, let me tell you a story.”

Nathan says, “There was a poor man who had a pet lamb. All he had in life was this cuddly pet lamb. It would sit on his lap at the table. Then one day along came a rich man who stole the lamb, butchered it, and served it to his guests. What do you say to this, Your Highness?”

David exploded, “Let me at him. He’ll be sorry for what he did.” Nathan was waiting with his two-by-four. “You are the man.” It’s you, David!

I'm so glad I wasn't there to see David's face. David got up off his throne, walked out of the palace, and in full view of everyone he lay face down in the dirt. He laid there weeping for days. That's what you call repentance. Then he confesses. He confesses before God and his people. And, tradition has it, that is when David wrote the great repentance Psalm 51, which we heard earlier:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me, cast me not out of your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me, Restore to me the joy of your salvation.

Notice that Nathan did not condemn David. Nathan knew that if David could pronounce judgment on himself, the impact would be a hundred times greater than if Nathan did it for him. So Nathan told David a story, knowing good and well how human beings tend to drop their defenses while they are listening to a story about someone else. When words are not aimed right at us, we can listen better. We are freed from our own points of view and can try on all the parts, finding out how different things look through different eyes.

That is what happened to David when Nathan told him about the rich man with many flocks and the poor man with nothing but one little ewe lamb. When the rich man stole the poor man's sheep, David rushed to the poor man's defense, and it was not until he had pronounced a death sentence on the rich man that he found out what he had done.

"You are the man!" Nathan told him, and David's heart split in two. "I have sinned against the Lord," he said—not because Nathan had told him so but because he had discovered it for himself, and that was the beginning of his coming back to life again. Technically, it should not have been. He had broken three of the ten commandments in short order—thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not kill. He had confessed his guilt and he had even condemned himself to death, but that was not what God had in mind for him.

"The Lord has put away your sin," Nathan told him. "You shall not die." That was the good news. The bad news was that his child would die, because in conceiving him David had utterly scorned the Lord. This may be the hardest part of the story for us—that a child should die for his father's sin—and I neither want nor know how to explain it to you.

There does seem to be an ancient understanding that while God has given us total freedom to decide how we will live, God has also set boundaries on that freedom. So there are moral limits we trespass at our own risk. Barbara Brown Taylor likens it to those old, old maps that go right to the edge of the known world and then post the warning, "Beyond here lie dragons." We are free to keep going—people do it all the time—but there are consequences, and consequences are different from punishments. I do not believe that God sits just past the boundaries, deciding whether to hit trespassers with a lightning bolt or a sickly child. That would not be freedom. That would just be a booby trap.

Instead, I believe God in all compassion has described for us the way the world works, letting us know that this is not only a material universe we live in but also a moral one, in which ethical acts have consequences just as physical ones do. Drop a stone out a window and it will fall to the ground. Conceive a child, try to pawn it off on another man, then make its mother a widow, and the child will suffer for all of that. Because it is the will of God? I cannot say. All I know is that we live in a web of relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation that responds to the choices we make. When we exercise our freedom in life-giving ways, even the trees clap their hands. And when we exercise it in death-dealing ways, the earth quakes

beneath our feet. None of us is morally autonomous. There are realities governing our life together that we cannot go up against without sooner or later discovering the consequences.

When we do discover them—as individuals, as a community, as a nation—God does not turn away from us. God sends us prophets to wake us up, to tell us stories that show us who we really are. If we are lucky enough to feel our hearts split in two, then we may find that even the death sentences we have pronounced upon ourselves are lifted, because the recognition of sin is the beginning of the end of it. The moment we know we are lost and say so out loud, God can hear us to find us and take us home.

Things were never the same for David after “the matter of Uriah the Hittite.”² He buried his firstborn son. There were lasting consequences to what he had done that he lived with the rest of his life, but the point is that he lived. God took him back and gave him new opportunities to exercise his God-given freedom. He and Bathsheba had a second son named Solomon who ruled Israel for forty years with unprecedented wisdom. David’s line survived to produce a boy named Jesus, who no doubt heard this same story about his ancestors David and Bathsheba.

Was David a good man or a bad man? You decide. I think he was both, as most of us are. If we remember him as a hero, I hope it is not because of Goliath, or the psalms, or the war stories. I hope it is because of that moment with Nathan, when he saw who he was and said so, so that God could say, “Come home.”

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

² 1 Kings 15:5.