

David and Bathsheba
Sermon preached on II Samuel 11:1-13
Rev. Judith Brown Bryan
1st Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2022

What has happened to David? If you have been following the sermon series this last month, you remember David, the shepherd boy, youngest son of Jesse. He was ruddy, handsome with beautiful eyes. Chosen by God, he was anointed by Samuel. He had courage and bravado when he confronted and killed Goliath with a sling and smooth pebble. Last week we heard about his godly and devoted friendship with Jonathan.

He was a noble warrior, vanquished his enemies and united the 12 tribes. A man after God's own heart, David was anointed King of all Israel. He went from achievement to achievement until now. On this first Sunday of Lent, we heard one last story of David and Bathsheba. We cannot help but wonder: What has happened to David?

I asked a number of Jewish friends what they made of the story. Most said, "I don't think I even know the story." When I asked what their rabbi might have preached about it, one said, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Not surprising. It's a difficult story to tell about greatest king of Israel. So difficult in fact, that some film makers have found a way to excuse David and blame Bathsheba.

Let's be clear. This is not a story of a female seduction. She did not ask for it. Bathsheba is not conniving to become David's wife. She didn't deserve it. There is not an iota of evidence that she is an ambitious temptress. Bathsheba is not even available, because she belongs to her father Eliam and husband Uriah. And, she was simply obeying her religion's practice of bathing after her period.

Nor is this a love story. In very short order, David saw her, sent for her, lay with her, then sent her home. No flowers or chocolates. No sweet talk or love notes. Not a word between them until she tells David "I am pregnant." The only story is that David, tempted by her beauty and aided by his power, simply indulged himself and took her. There are no excuses for David. This is a story of coercive power and corruption, even rape.

The pregnancy creates a problem for David. Bathsheba cannot be pregnant by her husband who is at the front. So David enacts a cover-up. Exercising his power as king, he calls Uriah home from the front intending that he lie with his wife. That will serve to explain the pregnancy and free David of suspicion. But Uriah is principled and faithful to his troops. He won't go down to his wife when his men are deprived of such pleasures. David is not pleased. So the next night he ups the ante. He wines and dines Uriah to get him drunk enough to cave to temptation. But Uriah does not.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Because David can make anything happen, he sends Uriah back to the front with a letter - a letter written in David's hand to give to Joab, commander of the army. It reads, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so he may be struck down and die." David intentionally sends Uriah to his death. The problem pregnancy is no longer a problem and David is in the clear. End of story.

But it cannot be the end. The story continues beyond what we heard today. The thing that David has done displeases the Lord. God sends the prophet Nathan to confront him. We need to understand that Nathan's life is in danger here. His message will not be welcome. So he tells David a parable. It goes like this. There was a rich man who had everything and a poor man who had nothing but one lamb, so precious to him that he raised it like a daughter. But the rich man takes that lamb, slaughters it, and feeds it to his guest. David is enraged by the behavior of the rich man and tells Nathan the man deserves to die. "Ah," says Nathan, "You are the man. You have despised the word of the Lord and done evil." Indeed.

What has happened to David? I'd like to offer three possibilities to consider that may apply to our own lives. The first is that David has lost his way. He has stepped away from his duty and calling as a king. Arthur Brooks of *The Atlantic* writes that the hero's journey is great when you are in the middle of it. The trouble comes when you've accomplished it all.

The whole point has been getting to the pinnacle. There's no blueprint for what comes next. Brooks explains David this way: "Ancient Israel's greatest leader, a man of impeccable valor and discipline comes home in triumph, and then falls prey to his petty lust. David failed in the last, hardest phase of the journey: being master of the self."

Leaders exercise discipline and adhere to their purpose and calling. They master their instincts and impulses in order to lead. Haven't we witnessed Ukraine's President Zelensky this week. He is master of his fear for his family and himself. Dressed in military garb, he is in the streets with his troops. He will not flee. He is prepared to die. He understands that his role and call is to be among the people to hearten and inspire them.

On the other hand, here's what happening in Jerusalem where David is King. It is spring, the text reads, the season when kings go out to battle. But David is not on the field nor at the front with his men. He's home leading what looks like a pretty leisurely life lounging on his couch until late afternoon when gets us to walk around a bit. He spies the beautiful Bathsheba and temptation beckons.

Now, none of us is immune from temptation. It is part of the human condition. Luke tells us that the devil waits for an opportune time. The devil found the right

time with David who has become undisciplined and neglectful of his duty. He gives in to his desire and in rapid fire breaks 3 commandments – coveting, adultery and murder.

Even Jesus is not immune from temptation. According to Luke, the devil tempts him for 40 days. Turn this stone to bread and prove your power. Jump off the temple and earn the affection and esteem you deserve. Bow down and worship me and you will have all you ever need.

Power, affection, security. These 3 temptations are what Fr. Thomas Keating calls our 'programs for happiness'. They are false programs and lead us away from our best selves. We need power, affection and security in infancy and childhood in order to survive. But as we mature, we begin to think that power and control will bring us happiness, so we try to control people and situations. We come to believe that security will bring us happiness, so we try to amass fortunes we don't need or head out to gated communities. Finally, seeking affection and esteem, we manipulate people to get them to love us.

Jesus is not led astray. Relying on Scripture and 40 days of prayer and fasting, he clings to God and his mission. I believe that when we take time to pray and reflect, we remember that our deepest longing is not for power or esteem or safety. It is instead to know God's love and then to share it as we are called. Holding fast to this desire helps us in the face of temptation.

Second, what has happened to David is that he's been captivated by power, perhaps the most dangerous of the false programs. He has come to believe that he's in charge. Instead of serving God, David has begun serving himself. He controls situations and people. He is subject to no one, even and perhaps especially, God. He is subject to nothing, including the Laws and Commandments. He takes what he wants, does what he wants, because he can. He is dangerous and death dealing.

We know what this looks like in our contemporary setting. Think Harvey Weinstein, priests and coaches exposed by the #metoo movements. Think authoritarian leaders who sacrifice their people to acquire more wealth and land and power. Or a politician dealing in insider trading. Or a captor abusing a prisoner.

We can see it in our daily lives, too. Consider a teacher using her power to humiliate a child. Or a child bullying a peer perceived to be less powerful. Or an adult child who steals from an aging parent. And, as we enter Lent, we remember how Rome and the temple authorities jointly used their power and sent Jesus to his death.

Power can be used for good of course. The power of God's love transforms lives and communities. According to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Power at its best is

love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

The story of David and Bathsheba is a stark reminder that those with power are free to abuse it. Those without have no voice and little agency. We can find Bathshebas everywhere. God calls upon us to use our power and privilege for good, to be their voice, to use the power of love to right wrongs.

In sum, David lost his way, submitted to temptation and abused his power. This is sin, a word we like to avoid. It’s sobering. But it does not have to be the last word. And that’s the third point for us to consider. The last word in this story is repentance, another sobering word and one we hear often during Lent.

When confronted by Nathan, David awakens, recognizes his sin and repents. Psalm 51, ascribed to him, is a prayer of repentance. He prays for mercy and forgiveness, for healing and a restored relationship with God. David returns. He submits to God and the Laws and Torah. He returns to his true path.

Ultimately this is a story about our merciful God. God does not withdraw his love from David, who is after all a man after God’s own heart. God knows his sin and hears his prayer. God forgives him. But there are natural consequences to sin. Bathsheba is widowed and mourns. David will not die, but his son with Bathsheba will. She will marry David, but there will be suffering. The future will be bloody.

God knows us too and hears our prayers. There is no deed God does not seek to forgive. This truth is for you and for me. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. This Lent, may we entrust ourselves to God to be healed and restored.

And ...May this story guide us into a Holy Lent. May we stay on the path laid out for us by Christ. May we embrace discipline and regularly go to prayer and Scripture. May we look for Bathsheba in our communities and use our power for good. And may we cling to God to sustain us this day and always. Amen.