

#BathshebaToo

The Prophet and the King (Part 2)

Last week I billed this sermon as the second installment in a three-part series of sermons I'm calling "The Prophet and the King." So if you came this morning waiting to hear more about Nathan, the prophet, you may be wondering what happened to him. He'll be back, but the path to Nathan's most memorable encounter with David passes through this story, in which the greatest of the Old Testament kings, the man the Bible celebrates as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14, Act 13:22) will also add the titles sexual predator and murderer to his résumé.

Now before I get ahead of myself, we should note that this story casts David in such a negative light that people have always struggled with what to make of it. I did a survey this week of the Bibles I have on my shelves and I found headings for this story that range from "David and Bathsheba," to "David's adultery with Bathsheba," to "David sins against Uriah." My edition of the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, who lived just after the time of Jesus, calls it the story of "how David fell in love with Bathsheba"—he also describes David's killing of Uriah as his way of helping Bathsheba cover up her sin! Of course, if it is too messy for us, we could always follow the model of the Bible's other account of David's life, in 1 Chronicles, and not tell this story at all.

The great twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, is reported to have said that theologians should “take the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.”* And it's all but impossible to read this story this week without our thoughts making connections to the #metoo movement which began by calling out the sexual offenses committed by powerful men in the entertainment industry. And to the grand jury report released in Pennsylvania this week detailing decades of crimes committed by Catholic priests in that state and the church's systematic efforts to cover them up. Or the graphic and disturbing account in the NY Times two weeks ago today, of the pastor of the Willow Creek megachurch's sexual abuse of women, and the fact that it took an article in the NY Times for the church's leadership to believe them.

This background helps us to understand something important in reading this story. It helps us to see that this isn't a story about misguided love, or adultery, or even really about sex. It's a story about the abuse of power.

The story begins, as it says, in the spring, when kings go out to war. But we need to read that expression loosely since, as we all know, most of the time kings—and presidents and members of Congress, and even generals—don't really go out to war in person. When's that last time you remember a head of state dying on a battlefield? I did a little research and even in World War 2, of the over 400,000 Americans who were killed in action only about 20 were generals. In the ways of the world, the men at the top stay safely behind the

lines. And David, who just a chapter ago was out leading his army in the field, has now become that sort of king.

And one day as he gets up from his chaise lounge after his afternoon siesta, he steps out of his royal penthouse for a little fresh air. Looking down on the city from his lofty height he sees a beautiful woman bathing across the way. He likes what he sees, so he sends his people to find out who she is. And then disregarding any sense of what might be right or wrong—including the fact that he, and she, are both married—he sends for her.

Let's not make any mistakes about what's going on here. There's no sense here of an affair between two consenting adults. This is a place where our modern English translations don't really help us. The Hebrew behind verse 4 says literally, "David sent messengers and he *took* her." There was no invitation, no flowers, no romantic notes, just men sent by the king who ordered her to come. Whether she resisted or fought back or not—Bathsheba didn't have any choice but to give David what he wanted. He was the king, after all.

We might be able to put our psychologist hats on and come up with a list of excuses for what David did. He was, to begin with, a man, and a man who was accustomed to action, who was more at home in the adrenaline- and testosterone-filled world of the battlefield than in a palace. He may well have been bored, finding his days filled with reading reports by the special

commission on sewage, and the like. He may have been anxious as he waited for news from the front. He may have been going through a mid-life crisis.

But at the end of day he's responsible for what he did. Whenever a person in a position of power uses that position for his or her own sexual advantage it is not simply about sex. At the best it raises questions about conflicts of interest, lying, and secrecy. But even more so, there is always a question of power—there's no way to be sure that sex with a student, or a patient, or an employee, or a parishioner hasn't been coerced. And that's why these days every profession has an ethical code, with clear definitions and sanctions for sexual misconduct. Despite what happens behind closed doors, despite who makes the advances, it is always the responsibility of the person in power to say "no." And in David's case, there's no ambiguity whatsoever about who's responsible.

Actually, given the fact that he's the king, I find it interesting that David is so worried about getting caught when Bathsheba sends word that she's pregnant. I think it says something about his basic character. In his position he could just take Bathsheba if he wanted her and not worry about what anyone thought. But he's so concerned—I think ashamed—that it does matter to him. Despite what he has done, this isn't the kind of person David wants to be. Now, he could have owned up to it. But in his shame he doesn't do the right thing. He tries to cover it up instead—and once he starts down that path he only adds one offense to another.

David's first cover-up attempt falls short because Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, is a better man than he is – actually he's a lot like the sort of man David used to be. He orders Uriah home from the front; he wines and dines him, and suggests that as long as he's in town, he might as well spend the night at home with his wife. That way when Bathsheba announces her pregnancy everyone—including Uriah—will think he's the father, naturally enough. But Uriah doesn't play along. He sees himself as a soldier on duty, and he's unwilling to take advantage of the position he's in—even with the king's blessing.

It's seems as though once he started down this path of lies, David isn't able to stop. So he comes up with a scheme to murder Uriah by proxy. Have the general put Uriah in the most dangerous part of the battle, and then hang him out to die. Who'll know? David's general, Joab, follows orders—and Uriah is killed in action. By the way, it requires Joab to commit a tactical blunder so bad that under normal circumstances he'd be court martialed. And it turns out that Uriah isn't the only soldier who will be killed in the process. David has more blood than just Uriah's on his hands.

If even such a good man—a man after God's own heart—can fall so far so fast it ought to give us pause. It should make us aware of how easily power can corrupt people, even good people. On one level that means that every system needs accountability. Although it probably began with insurance companies wary of lawsuits, at every level of the church, our Presbyterian system requires standards governing sexual misconduct by people in positions of

leadership—from Sunday school teachers to the moderator of the General Assembly. Our presbytery requires ministers to receive training related to sexual misconduct issues, with refresher courses every few years.

Just as an aside, one thing we learn in those courses is that the most common scenario for clergy sexual misconduct doesn't involve a sexual predator—although there certainly are clergy who fit into that category. It more likely begins in a counseling situation, or it involves a relationship with a member of a church staff, or a young adult youth leader who forms an unhealthy attachment to a teenager. In our presbytery's training, which Priscilla Brickley and I attended at a presbytery meeting this spring, most of the attention was the importance of ministers attending to our own spiritual and emotional health, of knowing where healthy boundaries are in our professional relationships, and are then creating and maintaining those boundaries.

David's story is about the abuse of power. And it's not only about sexual misconduct. David abuses his power to bring Bathsheba to his bed. And he abuses his power to cover it up.

And as we think about what this story means for us we should keep in mind all the ways that power can corrupt people. As Christian citizens we will be wise to be aware of that fact in our political system—beginning with the way that money is used and extending all the temptations our leaders face to put self-interest above the common good.

And we will be wise to pay attention to issues related to power in our own lives—especially when we're wielding the power—however small it might be compared to corporate presidents and congressmen. Because in our own small arenas we do have power. Just by being older and bigger than another child on the playground—because bullying is also basically about the abuse of power. Also in family relationships and work relationships. Do we use our positions for our own self-interest at the expense of others?

For now we leave David's story at pretty much its lowest point. If we know our Bibles we'll know that he will ultimately come through it in a way that will allow us to remember him as that man after God's own heart. But it's important to do what the Bible does in telling the story—not to rush to that ending, not to make it a story about cheap grace, but to live with this story and learn from it.

May God grant us the grace to become more deeply aware of ourselves, and to appreciate more fully the power of his redeeming love. Amen.

* The precise source of this quote has never been determined. "Perhaps the most clear statement on the record from Barth concerning these matters comes from a Time Magazine piece on Barth published on Friday, May 31, 1963: '[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians "to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'" (<http://barth.ptsem.edu/about-cbs/faq>)

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
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