

David and Bathsheba

I'm guessing you could all count on the fingers of one hand the number of sermons you've heard on today's Old Testament reading; for some of you this may even be the first one. Oh, it's a famous enough story—but not many preachers have ever wanted to delve into it, except for the occasional moralistic tirade on adultery (and probably very little of that in the last century or so). Rather than sermon material, this story has been the inspiration for poems and songs and novels—and motion pictures. After all, it has everything that appeals to Hollywood—political intrigue, violence and murder, romance, tragedy...and, above all else, SEX (or, in Uriah's case, the lack of it).

All Uriah had to do was 'sleep with' his wife. It doesn't really seem too much to ask, does it? After all, even the quietly understated language of the author-editor of Second Samuel notes that Bathsheba was "very beautiful". [2 Sam. 11: 2] Wouldn't any self-respecting heterosexual male have been happy to comply with the expectation of having sex with her, especially if there was nothing illegal or even unethical about doing so? We could easily judge that the whole sorry tale is his fault, after all. If only...if only Uriah had 'slept with' his wife. Then...except for the fact that the child might have had a ruddy complexion, beautiful eyes, and an uncanny musical ability—as well as a talent for writing poetry (some would have said, "second only to the king himself")....Yes, if only Uriah had 'slept with' his wife, then indeed, all *might* have been well.

And such is the case with so many human stories; just a case of one simple 'if only' and everything could have been so different. Of the many claims made about the Bible, only some of which may be anywhere near fair, at least we can always claim its relevance to human life. Some of us might be justifiably embarrassed that stories such as David and Bathsheba's are even included in holy scripture, let alone included in the lectionary and read out in public acts of worship such as this, but here it is before us precisely because it is such a clear and emotional and pathetically human story of the intricate relationship of power, deceit, lust, fear, love, and loyalty. There is something to be learned in a consideration of this story, I think.

Do any of you remember the actual Hollywood version, directed by Darryl Zanuck, starring a young and extraordinarily handsome Gregory Peck as David and the truly 'very beautiful' Susan Hayward as Bathsheba? My mother wouldn't

let me see it when it first came out, but I caught it later on TV. It's quite faithful to the biblical narrative in most respects but there are some interesting and fateful variations, all of which are designed to portray David as somewhat less responsible for the events. Bathsheba claims to have purposely bathed in his viewing to tempt him. David gallantly says he will not 'force' her to be his, for he is a Hebrew and not an immoral Egyptian after all! And David is shown as even a little less guilty for plotting Uriah's death as Bathsheba says, "I am guilty too, for I wanted him dead.") Likewise Bathsheba's own situation is somewhat explained away as resulting from a loveless marriage to a neglectful husband. Hollywood just didn't think its audiences could love a really *sinful* David, so set out to absolve him almost from the movie's first scene—just as I did when inviting you to think about Uriah's role in the tragedy.

Whenever the criminal is a hero, we are always tempted to blame the victim. Uriah was a fool. Bathsheba was a temptress. We might even say that Joab gave his king the wrong kind of support. Perhaps even the prophetic Nathan wasn't doing his job as well as he might have (you will hear more about him next week). Or maybe David's other wives were unbearably cold to him; earlier the author of Second Samuel certainly makes it clear that Michal was less than impressed with David's behavior, and the reference in the closing verses of Chapter 6 that "she had no child to the day of her death" would imply that they had no sexual relations after that incident of her disapproval of his nearly nude public dancing. [2 Sam. 6:23] Poor David, then, tested beyond the limits of human endurance. How can we blame him? It must be someone else's fault!

We want only to admire David, after all: regarded as the greatest of all Israelite kings, certainly the most-loved of biblical poets, and the ultimate role model for the promised Messiah (even to the extent of prophecies that the Messiah would be born "in the city of David" and thus known as David's own descendant). It's no accident that his name is also one of the most popular boy's names of all time—even extending to our own new minister whom we welcome in our midst today. So, for all sorts of reasons, we really feel quite uncomfortable dealing with King David the Sinner, don't we? It's easier to look around for who else might have at least shared the fault for the crimes this story exposes.

Or, all else failing, we could even blame God. Isn't it God who made us sexual beings in the first place? God who gave us that wonderful tendency to fall in love? Isn't God also, after all, in charge of everything? Doesn't everything basically happen according to God's will anyway? Really a pity that Uriah was killed, but God's will is hard to understand sometimes, isn't it? It was, after all,

"the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle" [2 Sam. 11:1]—so reads the biblical text with no comment as to why David stayed at home (but then we *know* why). It was the spring of the year, 'when young men's fancies turn to love,' a later poet wrote. And did not God make it so when the seasons were first designed? So let's blame the ultimate victim: blame God.

Fortunately the author of the 'Throne Succession Narrative' in Second Samuel does not succumb to such temptation. Probably written by an eyewitness to the events soon after David's death, and in its literary qualities clearly one of the finest examples of classical Hebrew prose available to us, this narrative says nothing at all that absolves the heroic David of his own responsibility. No blame whatsoever is attached to Bathsheba; she is clearly in no position to defy the king's orders. Uriah does innocently contribute to his own death, including the irony of actually carrying the royal execution order back to Joab, but Uriah's situation is only all the more tragic because of this. Joab himself is guilty only of unwise loyalty.

The author is a gifted historian who balances description and interpretation, trying to make sense of the events while remaining sensitive to the humanity of the characters, dealing in a subtle way with their motivations and emotions. And the theology presented here is about a God who works *in* human history, not by premeditated manipulation of events but mainly in and through the actions of humans, always working for the good of humanity even when the events themselves are filled with human evil.

The blame *is* David's, not because he 'fell in love' but because he abused his power. This is always and everywhere the foundational definition of unethical behavior and sinful relationships. It's not about love, not about gender or sexual orientation, not about whether or not there is a legal document of mutual commitment, not about attempts to find happiness, nor about whether or not we get caught. It's not about sex, and it's certainly not about God's will. It is about *sin*. And David's sin is clearly *abuse of power*. He did what he did simply because he could.

On this the whole rest of his story turns: the terrible grief of the baby's death, the complexities of succession in which he loses several other sons to their own tragedies of sin, the heart-breaking disappointment of not being the one to build a house for the ark of the covenant, the eventual anointing of his and Bathsheba's second son, Solomon, as king. All of this proceeds from David's choice and decision to place his own needs and desires above those of others—simply because he had the power to do so. Whatever great Hollywood romance may have

resulted, the story begins in abject selfishness.

In many ways, of course, David's story remains one of God's 'goodness and mercy following him all the days of his life,' as is promised in the most famous of the psalms attributed to this poet-king. [Ps.23:6] But it is also a story of blessing turning to curse, of terrible sin that results in still more terrible consequences; it is a story of the tragedy of human failing that is so great that nothing can ever completely take away the pain.

Abuse of power. What a warning we should take from this—individuals, nations, religions, races, all manner of humans in all manner of social and political groupings. We should all beware. Oh, we may claim to be humble. We may even at times feel *powerless*, all too aware of our own vulnerability. But that is such a trap; indeed, as soon as we feel powerless, we would be wise to look around and think again about the power we actually do have. The reality is that we all have points and places of power—including power over others—and if we do not have the good sense to acknowledge this and guard against our own potential abuses, then we are all in danger of great and grievous sin. Racism, individualism, sexism, classism, nationalism, materialism, fundamentalism—all the evil *isms* of human invention—where else do we think violence comes from, where else does war have its origins, where else does sin abide?

What can we do, then!?! If we can't blame the victims, if we can't refuse the power, if we can't ignore the risk; what *can* we do? Oddly enough, we can do much the same as David eventually did. We can repent. We can cry out to God for rescue from our own self-centered vulnerability. We can accept prophetic confrontation and make appropriate confession. We can trust in God's saving grace—and God's continuing desire to give us the hope of new life. We can repent—and be saved.

Repentance is more than acknowledging sin, though; more than an apology, more than a confession. Repentance is not a one-off event; it is a process. It is living our lives with sincere effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past—and open to changing our ways. And likewise, salvation is not a single even either; it too is a process of becoming free of regret and full of peace. This is what is possible for us...and more!

Because, even beyond what David was able to do,
we can put the dangerously-close-to-sinking ships of our lives
into the hands of the One who is still able to calm all storms;

the one who still calls out to us, "It is I, do not be afraid;"
the one who still promises to feed us with the bread of heaven
and the cup of salvation;

the one who was the most powerful of all and yet never abused power;

the one who asks only that we always and everywhere
seek to be our best whole selves
and thus worthy to be called by his name;

the One who himself did not shrink from the respectful compliment
nor the tragic responsibility
of being called
the 'Son of David.'

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