

David, and Bathsheba,

Dr. Dave Neale

In these past few weeks we have been reading the story of the establishment of the monarchy through Samuel, Saul and, this morning we come to this difficult story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah.

It is the story of an all-powerful king who takes whatever he wants, the young woman who is victimized by his actions, the murder of the woman's husband by the king to cover up his sin, and the baby who dies as God's punishment of the king.

It is a painful story; it is hard to read it. But I have a notion that we have always wanted to be frank about what happened in this story and look for its meaning for us.

On the surface, one meaning of the story is clear. David is led into terrible sins by his lascivious (lustful) nature and that this leads to sin upon sin, and the moral of the story is don't be lascivious. That reading wouldn't be wrong but it would be shallow.

There is more than that here, much more, and as I have reflected on the story this past while I think there are some pretty deep lessons that underlie the preservation of this story by our grandmothers and grandfathers, to borrow the kind of language our First Nations peoples use.

The community of faith preserved this story that, more than any, biographers of David the King, should have wanted to bury, to hide, to forget, to gloss over somehow by a different telling.

Just so we aren't overwhelmed with the darkness of all of this, the culminating saying in the story comes next week in our reading of Nathan the prophet's parable of two men, which he tells to David to awaken him from his moral numbness to his sin. And the culmination of the story is this line:

"I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Sam 12:13).

So the story comes full circle to David's repentance, and specifically his Psalm 51, his psalm of penance over his conduct with Bathsheba. But we don't get there until next week so I hope you will tune in for part II.

Context

David was king, and as with kings in antiquity, he was the supreme power in the land, in this case Yahweh's anointed ruler. You can make war, levy taxes, take wives and concubines, Samuel warned Israel in chapter 8 of 1 Samuel when they demanded a king.

But the thing you can't do if you are the king in Israel is break the law of God. This is what a king must never do, because as goes the king so goes the nation. Leadership isn't just a trendy concept we talk endlessly about. If there is corruption at the top, a nation is in grave peril. David was king.

Bathsheba was a married woman purifying herself with a ritual bath following her period. This bath takes place in a *mikvah*, a bath with running water (which can be found in excavated wealthy homes of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus).¹

Here the cultural difference with our own time is an almost insurmountable barrier to understanding the roles of men and women in society. Nevertheless, when summoned by the king, even though married, she had no choice in the matter. She does not choose this.

¹ See Leviticus 15 for mosaic prescriptions on menstruation. Such prescriptions about both men and women who have experienced an emission should be seen in the context of ritual impurity, i.e. maintaining the sacred purity of holy places, such as the temple or ark.

You may recall that in the Ten Commandments, the first four deal with our relationship to God: No other gods before me, no carved images of God, do not take the name of the Lord in vain and remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. This is what we call the First Table of the Law.

The last six deal with human relations. These are called the Second Table of the Law. We see by this how important the treatment of people is in the formulation of the law. So we see in the very structure of the Law of God how the right treatment of our fellow human beings is seen as the predominant theme. Life is all about caring for each other! Or as Chrissy put it so eloquently this week, 'Are we all going to just be selfish blobs?'

You also see this emphasis in the teaching of Jesus who said that the whole of the law is summed up in two directives: Love God with all of your heart... (remember how we have been defining "heart" – Intellect, memories, emotions, desires and will). And the second: Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18).

Of these second six then David violates at least three, maybe four.²

6: ***You shall not commit murder*** – David has Uriah sent to the front with the intention of withdrawing those around him in the heat of battle so that he will be killed. The prophet Nathan speaks the word of the Lord to David, ... ***You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.*** (2 Sam 12:9)

8: ***You shall not commit adultery.*** Here we have to adjust our reading to account for the cultural context.

The cultural context is different from our own.

As a king David's role was to produce dynasty, and thus he had 8 wives (see 2 Samuel 7:12 ff). While monogamy was God's original ideal (as in one man and one woman in the Garden of Eden, Noah, Proverbs), still monogamy is thought to have become the "ideal and custom of Jewish married life" only after the return from exile in Babylon some 500 years after David.³

One has said that in David's time polygamy was "tolerated" but not approved. David's polygamy didn't seem to attract any criticism of his rule, but Solomon's did. He got a little carried away with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3).⁴ They were all non-Israelite women, see my footnote online.

He may also be violating #9, ***You shall not bear false witness***, since he lies to Uriah about his intentions.

And # 10, the view that a man's wife or his slaves can be considered property is obviously a feature of ancient culture that we have left behind: ***You shall not covet your neighbor's house, wife, slaves, animals or any of his property.***

² The Ten commandments are found in various forms in Exodus 25 and 34 and Deut 5.

³ From the internet article: [Monogamy the Jewish Ideal](#), by Joseph Jacobs and Israel Abrams:

"In Judaism the Law tolerated though it did not enact polygamy; but custom stood higher than the Law. From the period of the return from the Babylonian Exile, monogamy became the ideal and the custom of Jewish married life. That monogamy was the ideal may be seen from several facts. Not only does the narrative of Genesis, containing the story of the first man and woman, point to monogamy, but Gen. ii. 24 is best explained in the same sense. So, too, in the story of the Flood, in which the restoration of the human race is depicted, the monogamous principle is assumed. Also the polygamous marriages of some of the patriarchs are felt by the narrator (J) to need excuse and apology, as being infringements of a current monogamous ideal Even more unmistakable is the monogamous ideal displayed in the Wisdom literature. The "Golden A B C of the Perfect Wife" in Prov. xxxi. 10-31 is certainly monogamous; in fact, throughout the Book of Proverbs "monogamy is assumed" (Toy, "Proverbs," p. xii.; comp. Cheyne, "Job and Solomon," p. 136)."

⁴ The problem there was that they were non-Israelite and Solomon accommodated all of the foreign gods of his wives. The Bible tells us that ***...the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord.*** (1 Kings 11:9).

David's fall from "rightness" is stupendous!

It is egregious, awful to contemplate what he did. So while you can just read this as a warning against lust, if we do only that we miss the deeper lessons, even more important lessons that it teaches. To put it another way, making this story simply about a lustful eye is to trivialize the grave danger in which David puts his kingdom.

From the Text

As you will not be surprised to hear, I have three points to make as we apply this story to our lives today – 3000 years after it happened.

Our three take-aways for the day:

1. Danger! Sin is a vortex
2. The story is the Bathsheba version of *#metoo*
3. David forgot the law so we should practice remembering!

First, there is a vortex that can form around moral failures of even a minor kind, resulting ultimately in a loss control over our moral compass. Certainly lust can be so powerful a force that it robs an individual of his or her common sense in almost a moment. The same can be said for any of the Desert Fathers seven sins: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth.⁵

There is an exponential escalation of David's lostness in his lust for Bathsheba. His actions take on the aspect of a vortex of moral failure that spins out of control.

How does this happen?! How is it that God's Anointed, sealed in covenant with God as represented by the Ark of the Lord in a tent on in his palace grounds, a good man, a brave man, a valiant warrior, a man after God's own heart, a man loyal to a fault to Saul as God's first king, how is it that David can so quickly become such a pathetic figure as the one we find in this story?

Perhaps it was David's isolation from the realities of daily life. He no longer goes to war, at least not this campaign. He is alone in his palace.

"Lost in the solitude of his immense power, he began to lose direction."

— Gabriel García Márquez, quote from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*⁶

Now I've never had any power – probably a good thing! This is certainly cautionary for us all. That our actions, when they begin to draw us out from the path of "rightness" can acquire a terrible force in life that we lose the ability to control.

That is, we never jump into the deep end of sin. The accountant who embezzles always starts with a small amount that he is going to pay back. We inch into sin little by little, until we are lost and we may not even realize it. David didn't it seems.

⁵ The so-called 'seven deadly sins' were first identified in the time of the Desert Fathers in the 3rd to 5th centuries, and later incorporated into the Catholic theology of confession.

⁶ From Sparknotes on the internet: "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* draws on many of the basic narratives of the Bible, and its characters can be seen as allegorical of some major biblical figures. The novel recounts the creation of Macondo and its earliest Edenic days of innocence, and continues until its apocalyptic end, with a cleansing flood in between. We can see José Arcadio Buendía's downfall—his loss of sanity—as a result of his quest for knowledge. He and his wife, Ursula Iguarán, represent the biblical Adam and Eve, who were exiled from Eden after eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The entire novel functions as a metaphor for human history and an extended commentary on human nature. On the one hand, their story, taken literally as applying to the fictional Buendías, evokes immense pathos. But as representatives of the human race, the Buendías personify solitude and inevitable tragedy, together with the elusive possibility of happiness, as chronicled by the Bible."

Sin is a dangerous business to the soul. This isn't being holier than thou... we aren't just being preachy or sanctimonious! We all understand this to be true because all have sinned. So we all hear this caution with knowing hearts – we must **remember** this story.

Second, this is a story about the abuse of power in this story. It has **#metoo** written all over it. There is something so frighteningly relevant about this story. Bathsheba is a victim of a powerful predatory king. In light of the developments in just the past couple of years where we have heard tales of abuse of power by victims who finally are able to speak up, abuse mostly against women, in everything from wages, to the glass ceiling in upper management, to sexual abuse as we see here.

Someone tell me, how can thirty centuries have passed with so little progress on the abuse of women by those in power? Me too, racial injustice, these aren't just politically correct slogans. They are about "rightness" and our ability to move forward morally as a society.

We ought to welcome every wake-up call in our societal consciousness. We should deploy the legal protection of rights *in law* as long overdue correctives to these ancient patterns of sin that just won't go away.

Third, the most important moral caution, and the reason this text was specifically preserved for the faith community of Israel is this: 'Don't violate the law; and these sins have a devastating effect on our lives.'⁷

There is a forgetting here in David's life. Here is a man who has suddenly forgotten the heart and mind of God. And the purpose of the story is to say 'I told you this would happen when you give a king power.'

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez there is the story of the troubled young Rebeca who comes to the peaceful village of Macondo and bring an insomnia plague to the people. This then worsens into a plague of amnesia where people begin to forget their childhood and then the names of things, the identity of people, and then even the sense of one's own being.⁸ This is a metaphor for what happens to us when we forget the Word of the Lord. We suddenly don't know who we are, we are no longer recognizable as God's children.

This remembering of which we speak is so crucial to our spiritual well being. We are called to be a people who **remember** whom we serve, **remember** what His commandments say, and live according to their dictates to best of our ability – knowing full well that none of us are perfect or get all the way through the drama of life unscathed.

This is what is such a threat about a rapidly evolving culture that can no longer agree on what constitutes the truth. As Jonathan Rauch says in his book *The Constitution of Knowledge*⁹, "[Truth] is not just a group of people commenting on each other's internet posts."

We can only thrive morally and spiritually by, as David Brooks puts it, "constantly refreshing" the reservoirs of knowledge through the stories we tell – in our case from this ancient morality tale of David and Bathsheba.

⁷ I have always struggled with that passage in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."

I think that as Jesus said this he had King David in his mind's eye. 'Look at how even David, the Lord's Anointed, was drawn away and forgot the law.

⁸ See page 45ff in the novel.

⁹ Here is borrow from the article by David Brooks in the NYT *How to Destroy Truth*, July 1, 2021.

And this anchors us in a shared truth. We know this anchor to be Scripture. We aren't just telling pretty religious stories here. We aren't just stuck in a rote repetition of tradition. Just how important is the teaching and preaching ministry of the church? Of Sunday School? How important is the teaching of the biblical values by which we form Christian community? It is essential. David is proof of it.

We are anchoring our hearts and our community in a shared understanding of the truth.¹⁰

[Musicians come]

1. Danger! Sin is a vortex
2. The story is the Bathsheba version of *#metoo*
3. David forgot the law so we should practice remembering!

Our last song today is a new one, *His Mercy Is More*. It looks forward to the grace that David and Bathsheba will eventually find to restore life following the terrible events of this story.

¹⁰ What constitutes truth is an important epistemological question of our day. As Brooks says, truth is a "network of institutions" of law and public administration, universities and responsible media, and, I would add, especially for us as Christians, religious tradition.