

Pentecost 8B
2 Samuel 11

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David & Bathsheba

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

²It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

⁶So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" ¹¹Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." ¹²Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

The writer of 2 Samuel begins the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah in an interesting way. He writes, "It was the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...but David remained at Jerusalem." Are we supposed to assume that David did not go out to battle because the army thought it was too great a risk that David might be killed and therefore urged him to stay behind? Or is the author implying a criticism of David? "It was the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...but David remained at Jerusalem." David is perhaps 48 years old at this time, so I can kind of relate to the age thing. It's hard enough for me to play basketball once a week against guys 20 years younger than me, much less strapping on some armor and trying to dodge weapons wielded by younger, stronger, faster men. I fully understand why David decided to stay home, but I imagine his public relations people had to spin the evening news reports a bit so that it did not appear that David was simply getting old.

It was maybe a little hard on the ego not being out in front of the battle anymore. A person used to being in authority finds it hard to give it up, so the desire to assert authority can sometimes come out in other, inappropriate, ways. That's what happens here. David sees something that he wants and he takes it. The main issue in the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah is not infidelity on David's part. As king in that ancient era, David had multiple wives and many concubines. Any concepts of "family values" we might have need to be set aside when looking at David. The main issue in this story is not sex, but power and the abuse of power. It is thus a story applicable to us whenever we are in a position of power over someone else – parent/child, teacher/student, employer/employee, public official/ordinary citizen, world superpower/third world nation.

I'd like to look at this story with you today from a theological point of view, using the concepts of God's law and sin. First, the actions of King David help us to see the importance of God's law, the value it has for us and for our society, and the consequences that follow when God's law is ignored. I realize that many people see the Ten Commandments as an intrusion on personal freedom, a list of do's and don'ts whose purpose is to keep us from enjoying life to its fullest. But God is not a killjoy, and this is not the purpose God intends for the commandments.

God gave the Law to his people as a gift, not a burden. I like to tell my confirmation students that the commandments are like an owner's manual for a car. The purpose of the owner's manual is to provide instructions for getting the optimal performance from the vehicle and giving the owner the best possible experience. By changing the oil and filters at regular intervals and checking wear on the brakes and tires, the car will last longer and perform more reliably. Following the recommendations does not guarantee the car will have no breakdowns, but as a general rule, the car will perform better and for a longer period of time if the recommendations are followed. The manufacturer provides these instructions not because it wants to make car ownership more difficult, but because, having made the car, it knows what will enable the car to perform most optimally.

The Lord God created human beings and human society and therefore God can be expected to know how society can function most optimally. The Ten Commandments are the "owner's manual" for us, both as individuals and as a society. Some commandments are pretty obvious – that society functions best when we don't kill each other and steal from each other. Those aren't too hard to figure out. The wisdom of other commandments may not be as self-evident:

- That it is important for us to have times of rest (God recommends a day a week) to renew our body and spirit
- That it is important for husbands and wives to be faithful to each other, lest trust be destroyed and the marriage relationship damaged – not to mention infidelity's negative impact on relationships with family and friends.
- That words have lasting power and we should be thoughtful and careful about what we say concerning ourselves or others, for if we use our tongues to curse, swear, lie, or deceive, we can all too easily damage reputations and relationships that are not easily restored.

What are the consequences if these laws are broken? Actually, it is a fallacy to speak of "breaking" God's law. God's law cannot be broken. It can be violated or disobeyed or ignored, but it cannot be broken. I like to think of God's commandments as being like the Rock of Gibraltar, that huge mass of granite that stands at the tip of Spain where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Mediterranean Sea. We can hit it and kick it and throw ourselves against this huge monolith, but the only consequence will be that we ourselves will be broken, while the rock remains unscathed. That's what happens when we foolishly think we can break the commandments and pretend they

have no authority. We discover that the commandments continue to stand before us, and we pay the price with our broken lives and our dysfunctional society.

In this one incident with Bathsheba and Uriah, David disobeys five or six of the Ten Commandments and in the next weeks as we continue reading the story of David we will see the consequences that follow when God's law is ignored. The consequences are real and painful, and are felt not just by the individuals who violate the commandments, but by the whole community.

A second theological observation is that in the Christian faith there is a need to hold two realities in tension – the reality of “what should be” and the reality of “what is”. The reality of “what should be” is summed up in the Ten Commandments. Obeying the commandments is the way God desires us to live our lives.

We don't need the example of King David to make us aware of another reality. We can look at our own lives and identify the reality of “what is”. We know what the Ten Commandments are, but we find it impossible to obey them all the time. The apostle Paul sums up this reality in his letter to the Romans when he says, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (3:23) This is our reality.

Jesus himself gives us an example of holding in tension these realities of “what should be” and “what is” when on one occasion he tells us “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and on another occasion, when an indignant crowd is about to execute a woman caught in adultery, says “let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:1-11)

I have a plaque in my office bearing the inscription “The Pastor's Study”. This is part of what it says:

The Pastor's Study is a symbol of the calling of the Christian minister to be the shepherd of a flock of God. Here you will always find a friend and counselor in time of need. Pastors will not be surprised at your sins, nor will they judge you in them, but always invite you to share with them the wisdom and love of God, the knowledge of forgiveness of sins, and the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

The portion of this inscription relevant to the point I want to make is the phrase, “Pastors will not be surprised at your sins, nor will they judge you in them, but always invite you to share with them the forgiveness of sins.”

As a pastor, I am not shocked or surprised at King David's actions – nor of the actions of any other person who has taken advantage of a position of power and authority to satisfy their personal desires while disregarding the interests of others. To say I am not shocked or surprised at such actions does mean I condone them. Nor does it mean that character and integrity are unimportant as long as one competently does his or her job. In many ways David was an excellent king, but if this was 2006 America and he was up for re-election in the fall, questions about his character, integrity, and use of power would be fair topics of discussion, I think – not the only issue or even the most important issue, but one of many issues to consider. But I am not shocked at David's actions or those of any other leader who might end up on the front page of the paper for abusing the trust placed in them. As a pastor I have come to know the truth of the old sayings, “In the best of us lies the very worst of us” and “There, but for the grace of God, go I”.

For all of the technological advancements we have made over the centuries, human nature is still the same. That's why the stories of the Bible and the ancient Greek plays about human "hubris", or pride, are just as relevant and insightful today as they were when they were written. When it comes to human nature, the writer of Ecclesiastes could already say 2500 years ago, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." (1:9)

We are used to stories of people who abuse power and seemingly get away with it. We are used to stories of people who abuse power and are unrepentant when they are confronted with it. Neither of those is the case in this incident. Next week we will read the conclusion of this story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and a new character, a prophet named Nathan. David will be confronted with his deeds and there will be consequences he will have to face.