

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

II Samuel 11 & 12

PENTECOST 21

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Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

Today's reading from the Narrative Lectionary is one of the Bible's most famous or infamous passages, which reveals a 'dark' side of Israel's greatest king, David, that is less than flattering and inspiring.

The story of David and Bathsheba is contained in the second main division of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the *Nevi-im*, or Prophets/Spokespersons.

The *Nevi-im* are divided into three groupings:

- the Former Prophets, which include the books of Samuel and Kings;
- the Latter or Major Prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel;
- and the Twelve Minor Prophets.

Biblical scholars have identified the historical account of King David in II Samuel, chapters 9 through 20, and the first two chapters of I Kings, as the Succession Narrative.

The writer (or probably writers) of this section offered this lengthy historical narrative to demonstrate the importance of David's regime, to defend its policies, and to express concern about who should succeed him.

David becomes a dominant figure in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Only Moses receives as much attention.

More than any other person, ancient Israel was fascinated by David, deeply attracted to him, bewildered by him, and, occasionally, embarrassed by him, yet Israel never disowned him.

We meet David at the height of his powers.

David is the original Alpha Male, the kind of man whose ambition and drive always lands him at the head of the pack.

To put it more into today's vernacular, David is Israel's first superstar or Rock Star.

He is a historical figure who's so compelling that the Succession Narrative was originally intended as a royal biography.

David comes across as an authentic sex symbol, ruggedly and ruddily handsome, inspiring loyalty in both men and women, a passion almost expressed as hero worship.

David, as one commentator put it, is the "quintessential winner."

At the heart of the Book of Samuel, where the story of David is first told, we discover a work of literary craft that anticipates the historical analysis of a Thucydides, the political wiles of a Machiavelli, and the psychological insight of a Freud.

What we truly find in David is a human being with great gifts, as well as flaws.

As Jewish historian, Abram Leon Sachar, observed, **“He [David] played exquisitely, he fought heroically, and he loved titanically.”**

David was a profoundly complex person of contrasts — cheerful, despondent, selfish, generous, sinning one moment, repenting the next — the most human of characters in the Bible.

I think Martin Luther had a person like David in mind when he told students, **“Sin boldly, but love God greater still.”**

For me, one of the most surprising things about David is the rawness with which he is depicted in the Bible.

David is shown to be a liar and a trickster, when, threatened by an enemy king, he feigns madness to save his own life.

He is an outlaw and an extortionist, when he uses the threat of violence to solicit a gift from a rich man with a beautiful wife, and he ends up with both the bounty and the woman.

He is also an exhibitionist, when he performs a ritual dance with such a spirit-induced frenzy, that his tunic flies up, revealing his genitalia to the crowd, much to the shame of his wife.

In today’s lesson, David comes across as a voyeur, a seducer, and an accomplice to murder.

He gazes upon the naked, bathing figure of Bathsheba, has her brought to his bedchamber, and then masterminds to have her husband killed in battle because she is inconveniently and immorally impregnated with David’s child.

Our text opens with a 50-year-old David.

He has been Israel’s king for approximately 20 years.

He has distinguished himself as a faithful shepherd, a child slayer of the giant, Goliath, a valiant warrior on the battlefield, a composer and singer of psalms, and a man of passion and compassion.

However, this next phase of his life will be characterized by sin, serious sin.

He breaks many commandments, and his sin will have devastating consequences for his family, his reign, and his nation.

Sin bears consequences at any age.

No one is too young or too old to fall.

In an unguarded and weak moment, David gave in to temptation and carnal desire.

God said that there were at least three things a king of Israel must not do.
He must not multiply horses for himself, or allow his people to return to Egypt to multiply horses.

He must not multiply wives for himself.

He must not greatly increase silver and gold for himself.

David was compliant in the first and third prohibitions, but, being a man of passion, he failed in the second.

David was in bed, not in battle.

Had he been where he belonged, leading Israel's army into battle, would there have been a Bathsheba incident?

Who knows?

Our greatest battles don't usually come when we are working hard.

They come when we have some leisure, when we have time on our hands, when we are bored.

That's where David was.

He belonged in battle, but, instead, he was in his bedroom.

Ancient Eastern monarchs in the era of David built their bedchambers on the second story of the palace, which had a door to a roof patio.

Situated high above and out of sight, a monarch could seek either refuge or privacy.

That's where David was when he slept late.

From his bedchamber patio, he heard the sounds of splashing water, and spotted a beautiful woman bathing.

The text in II Samuel 11:2 reads:

“From the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.”

The Bible names beautiful women only two times — Bathsheba and Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Rarely do the Scriptures apply the adjective, “very,” but when they do, rest assured, it is not an exaggeration.

Let's look more closely at what David did.

He stopped, stared, lusted, sought out, and committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Even though he knew she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, he still sent for her.

Uriah the Hittite was a soldier in David's army.

He was where David should have been.

When David realized that Bathsheba was pregnant, he called Uriah back from the battlefield to get a report on how the war was going.

He assumed Uriah would stay the night, sleep with his wife, and then later assume the child to be his.

But Uriah was too committed, and said he wouldn't go home and sleep in his own

bed while his comrades in arms slept in the fields.
Because Uriah wouldn't come home, out of loyalty, David felt pressured to remove Uriah, so that his own sin wouldn't be revealed.

David wrote a letter to General Joab, telling him to:

“Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest, then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.

So, while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah where he knew the strongest defenders were.

When the men of the city came out and fought . . . some in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.”

Do you know who Uriah the Hittite was?

When David was a fugitive in the wilderness, being hunted down by Saul, a group of friends voluntarily risked their lives to save David's life.

One of them was Uriah the Hittite, a man to whom David owed his life.

And this is how David showed his gratitude.

He coveted the man's wife, committed adultery with her, had the man murdered, and then lied to cover it up.

Half of the Commandments were broken in one awful, sinful act.

And this was done by the man who wrote psalms, incredible worship hymns, including Psalm 40 verse 8, in which he intones:

“I desire to do your will O my God; your law is within my heart.”

Seriously?

The man who wrote and meant that did this?

Now, what does this say to us?

The seeds of the most terrible deeds and atrocities, the capability of the worst possible deeds, live in every human heart . . . even the best of people.

Everyone is capable of this.

The seeds of those things, and the seeds of the worst possible deeds are right now in our hearts.

That's the teaching here.

That's the lesson for us.

And think of what a seed is.

Seeds are small.

Take an acorn.

Out of an acorn comes a huge oak tree.

Look at your life.

Do you see self-pity, resentment, envy and jealousy, pride or self-centeredness?

Don't you know what those can become if they fall into the right soil and receive proper nourishment?

Now, that's one important point from this.

And here is another.

A while back, a history course turned me on to the English Puritans and the British theologian, John Owen, who lived in the 17th Century.

Here is something I learned from Owen.

He said this:

“Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”

It sounds almost morbid, but there's wisdom here.

In other words, look for those seeds, see those things you are tolerating, and squash them.

It's a whole lot easier to squash an acorn than to bring down an oak tree.

Deal with them now.

You're putting up with fantasies, jealousies, putting up with enormous self-absorptions about yourself and the life you live, putting up with all kinds of stuff which, in the right circumstances, can grow into terrible things.

So, **“be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”**

Beloved people of God,

I have run out of space and time, and I have only addressed the sin side of the story of David and Bathsheba.

Next week, I will take up the rest of the story — the repentance of sin and the gift of grace.

In David, God works wonders through seriously flawed and sinful people.

And God brings Nathan into our lives, with the courage, shrewdness, and graciousness to speak the truth to us in love.

David, whose name means 'beloved,' charms everybody, even God, we are told.

Fortunately, his wiles don't work on Nathan, the court prophet, God's spokesperson and truth teller.

AMEN