



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE KING, THE GOVERNOR AND YOU”

Scripture Lessons: II Samuel 11:1-27

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, July 26, 2009.

As we all know by now and as we have all grown tired of hearing, our governor recently revealed in a public statement that he has been involved in an extra-marital affair and that was the reason for his sudden and inexplicable disappearance from both his state and his family in recent weeks. In the aftermath of this confession, he alluded to the biblical account of King David's adulterous liaison with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. And the governor mentioned specifically that the King's tragic failing did not result in his removal from the throne and he continued his leadership of the nation. The governor, no doubt, mentioned this in the hopes that he also might remain in office and complete his service to the state while trying to heal the breach in his marriage and family. It is too soon to know if either of these hopes will be realized.

Nevertheless, the story of David and his fall has now been brought center stage into public consciousness, so much so that The Post and Courier featured this biblical story in the “Faith and Values” section in the Sunday paper on July 12. To be sure there are some similarities in terms of the sexual indiscretion and sin. But there is a world of difference also between a king of Israel who is chosen and anointed by God and serves at God's pleasure and a democratically elected governor who serves at the pleasure of the people. What is more, the King's failing included murder as well as deception and adultery. And even though it is true that King David did continue in office after the fall, we should never ignore the fact that this failure in leadership and this deadly moral lapse proved to be a tragic turning point in the life of David, in the life of his family, and in the life of the nation. David would never recover from his fall. It marked a transition from David's public triumph to his personal tragedy and it marked the transition from a life of blessing to a life under curse. Not only did the child conceived from this affair die, but David's family and his nation spiraled downward in the aftermath and experienced the tragedy of division, defeat and even death.

Now the account of David's fall as recorded in the scripture is an artfully woven literary and spiritual masterpiece. As painful as it is to read it, we find illuminating insights and revelation, and not just about the king or about the governor but about ourselves as well if we are honest enough to admit it. This story is an anatomy of sin's insidious ways and the tragic consequences that derive from it. Walter Brueggeman, recently retired professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, has a brilliant commentary on Samuel and I am indebted to him for some of today's interpretive insights. He says of this biblical story: “We are at the threshold of deep, aching psychology and at the same time we are about to witness a most ruthless political performance. We pause before this artistic rendering because this text has the power and subtlety to address us.” The writer here crafts a tale of human desire with all of its intrigue and of human power with all of its potential for death and destruction.

I said that this story was perhaps too painful to tell. As a matter of fact the book of Chronicles which covers the same period of history as Samuel does not even reveal this flaw in David's character. Rather it gives us an idealized account of both King David and his kingdom. Some would

rather not acknowledge the flaws in their heroes and heroines. And the chronicler who is among those that consider David the greatest hero of Israel and her noblest king, would just as soon have forgotten that he was a deceiver, an adulterer, and eventually a murderer.

But if this story has been painful for those within Judaism it has been painful for others as well. It cuts deep and exposes the tangled web of human foolishness, fear and infidelity. What is more, this story is terribly contemporary, not only because we see parallels in our own day that are all too obvious but because we realize that whether we are talking about national leaders or private citizens, there is little about sin, its concealment or its consequences that has changed over the centuries.

And so now with your Bibles open to II Samuel 11, let me seek to expose this passage which conversely, also exposes us.

- 1 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.
- 2 It 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.
- 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite."

Our story begins in the spring of the year when Kings ordinarily go out to battle. Hostilities often ceased in the winter months in those days because travel and troop movements were nearly impossible. King David, having defeated the Assyrians is now on the verge of eliminating the threat of the Ammonites as well. But David now seems rather apathetic about the outcome. After all, King David is now at the peak of his personal and political power. His popularity and prestige are at an all time high --- which should have been a signal to be careful and cautious, rather than careless and casual. Unlike past military campaigns when King David, as commander and chief of Israel, actually led his troops into battle, "David remained at Jerusalem," as the text reminds us. And so this man of leadership has now become a man of leisure and is strolling about on the roof of his palace, surveying his empire and looking down on his subjects beneath him, idly awaiting word of victory from the front. While others are risking their lives the king is merely killing time.

It is clear to an informed reader that there is more here than meets the eye in these words, "David remained at Jerusalem." His priorities are changing and he is betraying the expectations and trust that has been placed upon him. Back in I Samuel 8 when the nation had begged for a king despite Samuel's warnings, we read: "But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may be like other nations, and so that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'" Kings and commoners alike tend to lose their focus, forget their mission and their calling, and betray their trust the higher they rise and the more secure they become in their power and position. Such was the case with King David.

From his roof David sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing and the Hebrew text suggests that this was more than just an innocent glance. It was a glance that became a gaze and filled David with lust and the determination to have this woman for himself, no, not to have her but to take her as he desired her. And so he sends his messengers to inquire as to who she is and they returned saying that she is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, one of David's faithful soldiers now at his battle station.

Two points here: To begin with, while she is given a name, Bathsheba, she is identified by the men to whom she belongs, first her father and then her husband. Sadly women had little status and less freedom in those ancient times but at least Bathsheba had a name and an identity to begin with. Once David had learned that she was the wife of another, he should have ceased his plans and redirected his desires. All David needed to know from his inquires was that she was another man's wife and therefore no fitting object of any man's desire, much less God's anointed king.

Secondly, notice that once King David has had his way with Bathsheba she loses her name, her personhood, if you will, and is referred to there after as the woman or as the wife of Uriah. The writer is trying to tell us some thing here. Bathsheba was a person in her own right but primarily, so far as Israel and David were concerned, she was another man's wife. Relations with her would offend the God of Israel and court God's judgment. If you open your Bible to the gospel of Matthew and read the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1 where some of his female ancestors are given their personal names --- Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, retained their names --- but Bathsheba a thousand years later remains "the wife of Uriah" lest any of David's decedents forget the injustice and the sin.

And now the action begins to accelerate at a hellish pace. Listen:

- 4 So 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.
5 The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

The action is quick and abrupt. The verbs rush at you. He sent, he got, (actually he took), he lay. Some people want to romanticize this scene and treat it as a love story, a harlequin romance, but it is nothing of the sort. There is no tenderness here, no compassion, no conversation, nothing to suggest that this was mutually agreeable or even consensual. Here is a story of lust pure and simple. Here is the arrogant abuse of power and the victimization of a beautiful and innocent young women, wife and daughter. Yes, Bathsheba submits, but unlike modern women who consort with powerful political and public figures, she was much more powerless and may have felt she had no choice. What does one do when summoned by the king? The writer seems to be contrasting David's blind passion with Bathsheba's innocence, even going so far as to mention that when David determined to have her Bathsheba was purifying herself physically. Her purity stands in bold relief against David's corruption.

Earlier in his life David had been a man of deep thought and genuine piety who thought, reflected, prayed and sought the will of God before he acted. This is the same David who earlier had composed many of the psalms, showed tenderness toward his friend Jonathan, displayed loyalty to King Saul and risked his life to defend the honor of his God. But now in his arrogance and power David acts without thinking, without considering the will of God or the wishes of others, without measuring the effects of his deeds. In light of last week's sermon on tests for discerning right from wrong, we might have wished that David had applied the test of conscience, the test of human effect, the test of human history and experience, the test of universality, of foresight and of publicity. Perhaps then he would have spared himself and countless others.

But no, David is now the King of Israel and will take what he desires and do as he pleases even if it involves another man's wife. And so, just at the moment when David thinks he is assuming control of the situation he is actually losing control. The moment he selfishly takes what he wants he begins to lose what he's been given. No, my friends, this is no love story here. It is a tragedy from beginning to end. And the tragedy begins to unfold when the woman, no when Bathsheba, sends word to the king with the first of the consequences saying, "I am pregnant."

“I am pregnant.” Those words have the power to bless or to curse, do they not? Many of us have rejoiced to hear them spoken. Others like David, have had their lives shattered by them. It all depends on the love and the intention that brought about that pregnancy and the degree of responsibility that those expecting are willing to accept with respect to the child they have conceived.

Next come David’s two initial strategies for covering his sin and concealing his guilt:

- 6 So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David.
- 7 When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going.
- 8 Then 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.
- 9 But 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.
- 10 When 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?"
- 11 Uriah 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."
- 12 Then 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,
- 13 David 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.

David must have been pleased with his carefully orchestrated cover up. He would feign interest in the war and summon home Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband and one of his faithful soldiers. To others it might have appeared that David was only seeking a briefing from a field officer. Three times David asked about Shalom, the Hebrew word for welfare --- first he asked about the welfare of Joab his general, then the welfare of his troops, and lastly the welfare of the war effort. But David is not a man of Shalom here and his words betray his intentions. The only welfare that truly concerns the king is his own. We could be magnanimous and say that David is also trying to spare Bathsheba and Uriah shame and pain, but that is being overly generous. David thinks that if he could only get Uriah to sleep with his wife while he is home on leave then everyone would be spared knowing the nature of the king’s sin or its consequences. In this way the true identity of the child Bathsheba is now carrying would never be known.

What David had misjudged and miscalculated was the extent of Uriah’s devotion and fidelity. He refused to go down to his own home to enjoy its comforts and pleasures so long as his comrades in arms were sleeping in tents in the heat of battle, so long as the Ark of the Covenant and the commander of Israel’s army, Joab, were still threatened by the Ammonites.

Next David decides to try to weaken Uriah’s resolve. He invites Uriah to a fine dinner and according to the text David doesn’t just allow him to become drunk but intentionally makes him drunk. Yet even this is to no avail. Uriah slept with the servants and steadfastly refused to go home to his own wife.

Does any of this strike you as odd? Here is a drunken foreigner, a Hittite, a man who is not even a child of the Torah who has more moral fortitude and personal integrity than the sober son of God and the King of Israel. Never think for a moment that God's people have better morals or more ethical integrity than others. In theory perhaps we should, but regrettably in practice we often do not. Knowing what is right and doing it are two completely different things. Even today those who adhere to the Judeo-Christian religion can claim no monopoly on moral teachings or ethical ideals. Godless people sometimes adhere to principles and practices that put us as believers to shame. And rightly or wrongly the world judges the value of one's faith by the character and the morals of the faith's practitioners.

David's strategies at cover up are failing so he grows more desperate, more devious, and more depraved.

- 14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.
- 15 In 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."
- 16 As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors.
- 17 The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well.

Do you see here the story of sin's progression? Sin unacknowledged and unforgiven inevitably leads to greater sin. David's lust becomes adultery, which in time becomes the murder of an innocent man and a loyal servant. One lie leads to another, one deception to another. That is why the person who cannot be trusted in little things should never be trusted in larger things. If you are honest you are honest in all things. If you are truthful you are truthful in all things. One lie, one crime, one infidelity it inevitably leads to another and the second is often easier but no less damaging.

Sir Walter Scott mused: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" David's deceptions become more distorted and his actions more perverse. So corrupt and devious has the king now become that he sends his faithful servant Uriah back to the battle carrying with him to be hand delivered his own death sentence. Listen as the tragedy deepens:

- 18 Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting;
- 19 and he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting,
- 20 then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall?
- 21 Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.'"
- 22 So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell.
- 23 The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us, and came out against us in the field; but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate.
- 24 Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also."

There is not time sufficient to analyze the exchanges between David and his general Joab. Suffice it to say that Joab knows what is being asked of him and he is also intent on protecting his reputation as a military strategist. So the message he sends back to the king is carefully framed in case his tactics become the occasion of public ridicule or military review, the message ends with what

Joab knows is all that matters to an obviously desperate king --- “Uriah the Hittite is dead.” Others have been slain in the battle as well but Uriah’s death would excuse all of the others for this desperate commander-and-chief .

Persons of power and political influence learn early on how to craft their words, their press notices in such a way as to conceal truth, promote deception and excuse their own foibles and failures. They can turn the attention from the crucial matter at hand to a trivial, peripheral concern. They know very well that how one is perceived is far more important than what one actually is or does. And yet, we are all sinners and where we are public figures or private citizens, sometimes we too act as if perception is all that matters and that truth is only a minor concern.

So Joab has his orders in hand, orders which he knows will stand up in any court should he ever have to account for his leadership, and he knows even if the king should act as if he is angry when the news from the front reaches him, it will be a ruse because all that matters to King David is the fact that Uriah is dead. And Joab, regrettably, is right!

David sends a message back to Joab which is both revealing and indicative of the depth of David’s sin:

25 David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it.' And encourage him."

26 When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him.

27 When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD,

At last David can breath a sigh of relief, or so he thinks. With Uriah dead, David’s sin has been covered and the monarchy has been spared. Bathsheba can now be claimed as his wife and the identity of their child will never be known --- or will it? “Don’t let this trouble you,” David says to Joab. Only the two of them at this point fully understand what David is saying. David waxes philosophical but the reader knows how perverse the king’s words are. David suggests that in time of war the sword ultimately claims good men. That is a general truth but it is also a corruption in this instance. Uriah did not die as a result of battle, but as a result of intrigue, deception, lust, adultery, abuse of power and heartless murder. What David literally says is: “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes.” But Joab, like David, had the sense to know that this thing was in fact evil!

And yet there was still another who also knew. He knew what had been done and he knew the evil of it. And it is his judgment alone that ultimately matters. The tragic story ends with his ominous word: “But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.” Again, what the Hebrew literally says is a parallel to verse 25: “The thing was evil in the eyes of the Yahweh.”

You see, in the final analysis, in matters of morality and ethics the only one who’s opinion finally matters, the only arbiter of truth, morality and justice is Yahweh. The world may never know or hardly care what we do or refuse to do. But God knows and God cares. Our actions and plans may be excused or even approved by an adoring public, but if God is displeased, if God judges our deeds as evil, then this is the judgment that counts, as David will soon discover. For whether we are talking 1,000 B.C. or 2000 A.D. the fact remains that morality is not determined by popular vote or prevailing custom. Morality is not determined by what others do or even by what they think best or appropriate. God alone distinguishes the good from the evil. And here is a truth in need of repeating

for it is a message largely ignored and discounted in our culture, by its leaders, its media and its average citizens. Sometimes it is even ignored by the very people of God.

In closing let me say that the governor's recent allusion to the story of David and Bathsheba is not inappropriate, only somewhat superficial and naïve. What David's sin ultimately teaches us, whether we are kings, governors or ordinary citizens is that sin has disastrous consequences for the sinner and for the larger community of innocent victims. We do well to recall David's sin with Bathsheba, but with apologies to Paul Harvey we need to remember "the rest of the story," because remaining in office was but a minor, even trivial fact from the story. The greater lesson is that sin always pays its wages and as Paul would later put it: "The wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.