



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“KING DAVID IN A BETTER MOMENT”

Scripture Lessons: II Samuel 12:16-23

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, August 9, 2009.*

Two weeks ago we focused in worship on David's adulterous taking of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, his deceptive scheme to cover up his sin and his perverse plot to kill a loyal and innocent man. Without question this was one of the worst moments in the life of King David and proved to be a bitter turning point in his own life and the life of his family and in the life of the nation Israel that he served. Without question this episode from David's life revealed the dark side of a desperate man whose sin became all-consuming and destructive of himself and of those around him.

Before preaching that sermon one of our members called and requested that at some point I also deal with how David grieved and responded to the death of the child born as a result of his liaison with Bathsheba. She said that she considered this one of David's finer moments and his ability to deal with the loss of a child had been an encouragement to her and her family. Surely it has been that to many who have lost children or had to cope with other great disappointments. This is one of the few passages in the Bible that deals with a death of an innocent baby from the perspective of a parent.

Now to be sure King David had his better moments and they were numerous. Despite his failings and his foibles, David is referred to as “a man after God's own heart.” (I Samuel 13:14) And David's sin, his tragic decision to enter into an illicit relationship with another man's wife does not negate the good he accomplished and the noble things he achieved. Nor did David's sin destroy his relationship with the God he had offended.

In checking my own sermon records I discovered that I have preached on King David some 14 times over the course of 40 years of preaching and most of those have dealt with David's better moments, his heroic and humble service to God and to others. His better moments include but are not limited to, the courage he displayed while keeping his father's sheep as he fended off wild animals, his bold decision as a young man to go into battle alone against a giant named Goliath in an effort to defend the honor of Israel's God; his artistic skills in writing music and poetry that would sooth even mad King Saul; his devotion to his friend Jonathan, his selfless loyalty to King Saul and his refusal to exact revenge even when he had the opportunity; his protection and care for the little crippled child who was the lone descendent of Jonathan, Mephibosheth, and ostensibly a rival to the King's throne. Yes, David certainly had many exemplary and faithful episodes in his life and it is no wonder that he is still honored as one of the heroes of Israel and the people of God. And yet, in my preaching I have never dealt with this particular passage that we listened to this morning revealing how the King coped with the loss of the child born to Bathsheba. I agree with my friend that this too is one of David's finer moments. Let us consider it now.

Having his sin with Bathsheba outed by the prophet Nathan, David is told that the child Bathsheba is carrying will die. Here is another biblical reminder that sin has its disastrous and often unimagined consequences. Our sins honestly confessed can surely be forgiven by a merciful God, but God does not always spare us their consequences. With those we must live and deal as persons of faith to the best of our ability.

Nathan makes it clear that cost and consequence of David's affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah whom David had also murdered, would be that the child would not survive. And what, you might wonder, does this cost and consequence say of a merciful God? I encourage you to be careful what you read into this prophecy. I do not believe that God wills the death of any innocent child as a punishment for some sin, David's or anyone else's. God is not in the business of punishing the innocent to cover the sin of the guilty, except of course with respect to the punishment born by his own son on behalf of sinful humanity. No, I think Nathan was simply prophesying a truth, a fact about this child now in the womb. The anxiety and stress and shame in Bathsheba's life, brought on by her abuse by the king and the death of her husband and its accompanying grief, surely would have had an effect upon the child she was carrying. Nathan's prophecy proved to be correct. The child did not live and no doubt David's sin contributed to this reality. But this result was not the Lord's doing and surely the Lord grieved for this child as did it's parents.

Some of you today here are among the countless number of parents who have lost children in utero, or soon after their arrival, or even in childhood. I would not have anyone leave the sanctuary today wondering whether God was exacting that cost for some particular sin in your life. To be sure, there is a connection between sin and death. We don't get beyond the third chapter of Genesis before we discover the tragic connection. And yet, we cannot necessarily draw a straight line between a person's sin or a parent's sin and the death of a child. Perhaps if a mother had abused her body throughout alcohol or drugs or taken some unreasonable risk in how she carried on her life, then maybe there could be a direct connection between a conscious decision or act and the death of a child. But of course, all of us are sinners, are we not? And all of us exercise poor judgment on occasion and so any parent who loses a child or sees that child afflicted in some way can often drive themselves crazy by trying to see how their child's plight is some kind of divine retribution for something that they must have done. But this is not a healthy or productive exercise.

Accidents happen. Anomalies occur. Illness attacks, through no fault of a particular individual. These are not punishments for any particular sin. Rather, because of the sinful condition of the human race we can sometimes discern a connection between the sin of humanity and the suffering that people endure. Perhaps if we had spent more money on medical research, on maternal nutrition or infant health care instead of on bombs and bonuses and wasteful extravagance, we would have done something to address the causes of illnesses and reduce childhood mortality. Do you see what I am saying here? Yes, sin and death are connected in ways we cannot always determine but there is not always a clear and discernable connection between an effect and its cause. More often than not the causes and the effects are numerous, unknown and mysterious and we must cope and move on.

Theologically another reality we must keep in mind is that in Biblical days the Jews had such a pronounced commitment to God's ability to carry out his will and his purposes that they came to believe that everything that happened was the will of God being accomplished. So often, as is the case here where the Lord is said to have "struck the child" with illness (v.15), the Jews attributed every reality, good or bad, to the will of God. Today we may distinguish between God's perfect will and God's permissive will, but this has not always been the case. Consequently the Jews would on occasion attribute horrible things to the will of God. I would personally prefer to say that God can use evil for his own purpose but that is a far cry from saying God wills it.

Now I want you to pay close attention to how David's closest advisors respond to the king's actions in two instances because we see revealed here something of David's character and his faith. Those around the king are both surprised and dumbfounded by his actions. First, they don't understand David's deep concern for this child and his grief stricken intercessions on the child's behalf. Secondly, they don't understand the sudden change in David's countenance one the child has died. But in both

instances we see David in a better light than we did two weeks ago and realize why, despite his sin, he is rightly referred to as “a man after God’s own heart.”

First, let us consider David’s grief and his prayer. The elders about the king probably viewed his display of grief as both inordinate and unnecessary. Why should he grieve so over this one child? Babies died all the time and especially in those ancient times. And besides he had other sons and surely would have more. Was this not a rather excessive display of grief? And, what is more, had not David already been told by the Lord through the prophet that this child would not survive? Why then all this fasting and prostration and fervent prayer?

But you see David knew full well the nature of the God he loved and served. He knew that God would take no pleasure in the death of an innocent child. God was no unfeeling, malevolent autocrat. The songs David composed revealed the depth of his insight into the character and heart of God. In one of David’s psalms, the 145<sup>th</sup>, David declared:

- 8       The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
          slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9       The LORD is good to all,  
          and his compassion is over all that he has made.
- 17       The LORD is just in all his ways,  
          and kind in all his doings.
- 18       The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
          to all who call on him in truth.

So David is both genuinely concerned for the child who suffers at least in part because of David’s own sinful choices, but he also realizes that a gracious and merciful Lord maybe able to intervene in some way. Maybe the Lord can allow David to bear the consequence of his sin in some other way so that the child at least may be spared.

David is not trying to blackmail the Almighty here. He is not trying to negotiate a plea bargain. He knows full well that he is guilty and that he deserves nothing but death himself, as he declared earlier to the prophet Nathan. But he also wants his God to know that he knows this, so all through the night he prostrates himself before God and pleads for the child. Maybe in God’s freedom and mercy another judgment can be found.

It is no sign of weakness that King David so responds. It is rather a sign of his understanding of God and of his willingness both to reveal his own heart to his God and if possible to seek another way for God’s purposes to be served.

But then the boy dies. The elders feared telling King David. So distraught was he during the child’s struggle for life that perhaps he would now harm himself or others if he learned the truth. But without being told David perceives that the child has died. I am reminded of Truman Capote’s line in A Christmas Memory when his friend (Miss Faulk) dies. Speaking of her death he writes: “When that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself . . .”

But if the king’s intense grief so surprised and possibly even disturbed the elders about him so too did his sudden change once the child had passed. Instead of harming himself or flying into a fit of rage or resentment, the king calmly gets up from the ground, bathes, anoints himself and dresses, has a meal and then goes into the sanctuary of the tabernacle to worship the God before whom he had so

recently prayed and fasted. Once again the elders are startled and confused but once again we see David in one of his better moments.

If David knows that God was gracious and merciful, good and compassionate, just and kind, and near to those who called him, as David's psalm so beautifully expressed, he also knew that Yahweh, the God of Israel and David's God, was also the sovereign Lord of life and history. God's plans and purposes were not always known by or even understood by his servants. God's ways and God's works are nonetheless always righteous and perfect although they remained a mystery to man. Any number of the psalms of David allude to this truth.

So David the King recognized that there was a sovereign over him as well and that this sovereign God could be trusted to do what was right and good despite how it might appear to his servants.

In her commentary The Message of Samuel in "The Bible Speaks Today" series, Mary J. Evans writes:

"David recognizes both God's freedom to act in whatever way he thinks best and that human prayer may play a part in the decisions God makes. There are occasions when it is right to keep on praying and there are occasions when it is right to accept the inevitable and move on. The important thing is to recognize the difference between the two. David, in this if in nothing else in this lamentable episode, stands as a model for later believers." (pg. 217)

There is no clearer witness to the faith of a believer and to one's confidence in a loving and sovereign God than to do what one is able to do while one can and then trust the results to God alone. David's advisors may not have comprehended the king but the king surely comprehended his God. And when we face tragedies and losses in life, we do well to remember the witness of David here, and how he prayed and fasted and did what he could while he was able, but in the final analysis he trusted the results of his praying and fasting and the course of the future to the God who alone knew best. Few passages in the Bible give us a clearer picture of what it means to accept and to live under the sovereignty of God. We can always trust God to be gracious and good, compassionate, just and merciful, but from the human point of view we many never understand God's methods. And yet we can affirm what we may never see for we "walk by faith and not by sight." (II Cor. 5: 7)

And finally as the passage draws to a close, David, in accepting the child's death and the Lord's will, says in a revealing statement "I shall go to him but he will not return to me."

At a minimum this verse, while not being a full blown affirmation of a belief in the resurrection of the dead, does seem to suggest that David believes that this earthly life is not all there is in that there would be yet another reality, another dimension beyond this life in which he would see this child for whom he had interceded and whose life was all too short. That belief also has sustained many parents as they have had to cope with the loss of children. Maybe we shall yet come to see in the providence of God how what we took to be a tragedy was in fact an act of God's mercy and justice and grace.

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