

### **Power, Audacity and Evil - Part 1**

This summer we have been working our way through the books of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible with a particular focus on the stories of how Israel came to have a king.

It's been the story of how the people of God were eager to live under the authority and influence of a king, like all of the other nations in the known world.

It's been the story of how God, speaking through prophets, resisted this request of the people with the concern that under the lordship of God, there was no need for an earthly king.

It's been the story of the people's persistence and of God's finally acquiescing to the request.

It's been the story of what it is to live in God's kingdom and of how we discovered that it might be more accurate to describe it as a kingdom where people lived together in a community where mutual love and respect are center stage.

It's been the story of how Saul came to be that first king and of how it didn't quite work out as hoped.

It's been the story of how a successor to Saul was chosen—a successor, by the way, who was not in the lineage of Saul, but rather who came from another family—that of a man named Jesse.

It's been the story then of this youngest son of Jesse, a boy named David, and of how he became God's anointed king of Israel.

To this point, it has been the story of how David rose to the throne and was destined to be the model king for all other kings who would follow in this kingdom that was to last for generations to come.

While there have been some bumps along the way, for the most part, this has been the story leading to what was to be the ultimate, the crux, the template for the king and kingdom from here on.

For those of you who have been here through these summer Sundays, to have opened the bulletin and seen that our scripture reading today is once again from the book of 2 Samuel, may have thought that the story continues on this same upward trajectory. Because after all, isn't the Bible filled with stories of wonderful God-fearing and God-loving, spiritually mature and exemplary characters from whom we are to gain wisdom, insight and inspiration for our lives of faith?

And then, you heard me read the passage today which is the Biblical account of David and Bathsheba which is anything but encouraging and inspirational. On the contrary. This is a story of power, audacity and evil. In spite of some attempts over the years to put a less negative spin on this sordid story, the truth of it is that it's a story of human lust, rape, deception, and murder.

Did you hear that? The word of God from the scriptures today is a story of human lust, rape, deception, and murder.

People of faith who are readers of the Bible have, for ages, been pondering the question of why this story of a prominent national leader acting in such a despicable manner is included in the holy scriptures. Why, when putting together the events of the life of King David, did those who assembled the various stories choose to include this one? The biblical accounts, while giving a lot of attention to

David both before he became king as well as once he was enthroned, nevertheless did not write the definitive and exhaustive biography of this man, and yet what did get written down included this really wretched event.

In fact, among the simple techniques of basic critical analysis of the scriptures is to keep in mind two basic facts. First, that the parchment like material of the scrolls on which scripture was written was very hard to come by which meant that the writers of scripture had to be very lean and Spartan in deciding what was worthy of being set to writing. And the second basic truth to bear in mind is that what was eventually written down had first been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. So again, the question persists, if scroll parchment was so limited and if the stories that survived are the ones that were told over and over again, why did this event of King David's disgusting immorality make the cut?

To wrestle with this question is what we're being called to today as we consider the truths that this story has for us today.

This event is the turning point in the story of King David. Up until this point, David is living his life in faithfulness to God and as God has anointed him to be Israel's king, God's blessings have been showered on both David and on the entire kingdom. Up until this point, everything was pointing to a golden age for Israel in which David and his successors would reign far into the future, if not indeed forever.

And for sure everything was going well for King David and for Israel. But as we read in this account, it happened in the spring when battles were successfully being fought to defend the kingdom from outside threats. But in this spring, King David, the commander in chief, was no longer with his warriors leading them in battle to victory as he had always done previously. No. He was leaving those battles to his military subordinates who served at his pleasure. David was far from the battle front and was actually lazily lounging around his palace and out onto the roof in which he could look over his kingdom entrusted to his care. But what caught his eye that particular day was not the expanse of the kingdom, but a woman bathing that he could spy on. In spite of the fact that King David already had at least 19 wives and concubines (concubines being a sort of second level wife), he found himself lustily aroused by the sight of this woman. Because he had the power to do whatever he wanted, and because he had those who served him who carried out whatever he commanded, David chose to pursue this woman by ordering his servants to find out the identity of this woman. What he found out is that her name is Bathsheba and that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite. This information alone should have stopped David in his tracks. Uriah the Hittite was the commander of Israel's army that was currently engaged in battle. Uriah was a trusted military leader who was doing the King's bidding at war. Finding out that Bathsheba was his wife should have been the end of the story. But no, David's devious lust had the best of him when he knew that Bathsheba's husband was not home today. So he ordered his servants to bring her to him. They brought her to David and he proceeded to have his way with her which resulted in her becoming pregnant. Bathsheba's only words recorded in this story is to send word to the king, "I am pregnant."

As disgusting, repugnant and immoral this event is to this point, King David's actions get even worse from this point on. For David spends the next several days occupying his attention not on affairs of state but rather on how he can get Uriah back to Jerusalem so that he can sleep with his wife, Bathsheba. He thought he could contain the potential fallout from his egregious behavior by controlling the narrative by ensuring that Uriah and everyone else, except Bathsheba and David, would think that Uriah is the father of Bathsheba's baby. But as powerful as he is, David cannot bring Uriah to break with

the military code of behavior that warriors remain abstinent in time of war. So desperate is David at this point to control this situation that he orders a battle strategy to be pursued that will result in Uriah dying in battle. And that's exactly what happens. In a matter of days, the woman that David first spied on from his rooftop became a victim of sexual assault, pregnant with David's child, as well as a widow.

From here on out, things for David are no longer so easily laid out. No longer is the blessing of God the default that results in good things for the nation. As we'll find out next week, God is very displeased over this turn of events. David's family life begins to unravel with increasingly dysfunctional family dynamics at play.

Eventually that which had been unthinkable only a little earlier eventually comes to pass. That is the kingdom of Israel does not last forever or even far into the future. In fact it starts to fall apart in a big way with the king who follows David. Some biblical scholars have suggested that this story of David and Bathsheba is included in the Bible to explain that David's sin is the reason that Israel did not last forever. It's not that God broke the covenant promise. Rather it is that David broke it. From a broad-strokes-of-history point of view, this explanation of why this story is included makes sense.

But I'm inclined to believe that there is more to it than simply making the whole time line of history flow better from generation to generation. This could have been accomplished without including the sordid details of David's sinful behavior. So the question remains of why the *details* of David's moral failure are included.

One of the amazing things about the Bible is its enduring relevance across the ages. Closely related to this is the perspective that we in our tradition bring to how we understand the truth and meaning contained in the Bible. That is that there is new truth and understanding to be gleaned from the pages of scripture as we look at it and study it from our vantage point in history. We believe that new and deeper understanding are revealed as we engage the scriptures in our day. Although we will never come to fully understand and know all the truths in the Bible, we are called to strive for it throughout our lives of faith.

With that said, it's worth noting that the most recent issue of *The Christian Century*, a long-established magazine that engages the intersection of our Christian faith with the issues in our world today, has as its cover story, "Sexual assault in the Bible." (August 1, 2018). In this issue are two articles that address this subject in light of the #METOO movement in our nation. The Rev. Ruth Everhart, a Presbyterian pastor who herself was raped early in her career, writes, "As Christians we share many painful stories—the painful stories of our lives and the painful stories of scripture. When we faithfully wrestle with both kinds of stories in the context of the Body of Christ, we become conduits of good news, no matter how imperfect our preaching or exegesis may be. Believing in Jesus is not a matter of assenting to certain doctrinal truths but of trusting the One who tells us that the truth will set us free." ("The Bible's #MeToo stories" p. 25)

My friends—brothers and sisters in Christ—our engaging this biblical narrative of David and Bathsheba today has resulted in some discomfort, some disgust, and some sadness for sure. I want you to go from here today though with at least a glimmer of good news, for that should always be the end result of Christian preaching. And although I will take up part 2 of this story next Sunday, I want to reiterate the words of Paul that we read from his letter to the Ephesians. "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:18-19)