

Power, Audacity and Evil - Part 2

When we were last gathered here, one week ago for Sunday worship, I ended the sermon with these words from the apostle Paul's 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) These words were a much needed counterbalance to what we were wrestling with in the first part of the sermon—namely the sins of King David.

To recap: It began on a spring day, when Israel's 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. Now 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 when he wandered out onto the roof from which he could look over his kingdom entrusted to his care. What caught his eye that particular day was 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 her identity. What he found out is that her name is Bathsheba and that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Uriah the Hittite, by the way, was the commander of Israel's army that was currently engaged in battle. Despite this fact that Uriah was a trusted military leader who was doing the King's bidding at war, David's devious lust had the best of him when he determined 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 a message 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.

It's a pretty grim state of affairs from a moral and spiritual point of view. King David in selfish arrogance has done what he knows is reprehensible. We know that he knows this because of the great lengths he goes to in order to cover up his sin with Bathsheba—so far that he arranges for his military commander, who by the way had no role whatsoever in this matter, to be killed in battle.

It must have been a relief to David when word came to him that Uriah was dead. Rather than mourn the death of his chief warrior, he heaves a sigh of relief that his devious plan had worked. Now he could get on with his life once he attended to one last matter. That is taking Bathsheba the widow as yet another wife, once the requisite period of mourning had passed.

Apart from his trusted servants who were sworn to secrecy over everything that they saw the king do, good and bad alike, David managed to get through this sordid chapter with no one knowing what he had done—with no one knowing that he had lusted after another man's wife, that he had sexually assaulted her resulting in an unintended pregnancy, that he had sought to deceive the husband of the woman named Bathsheba, and that he then ordered the husband's death. David thought that he was in the clear after fixing up everything just right.

But boy was he wrong about that. Pastor Shawnthea Monroe puts it this way. "What David is about to discover is what every person of faith needs to remember: we live *coram Deo*—ever before God. Even when our actions are hidden from all other people, God knows our every move—and stands in judgment. As the opening words of Psalm 139 declare, 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me.' If David had simply remembered this, he might not have gotten into such trouble." (*Feasting on the Word: additional essays for Year B Proper 13*, © 2012 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 1)

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible puts it this way, "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord." A more literal translation is, "The thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of YHWH." (*ibid*)

David thought he had it all under his own control—that he alone could fix the mess he had made. David forgot just how he got where he was and where the power and authority he wielded came from. David forgot about his kingly role of caring for and protecting the people of Israel, and instead saw them as pawns on a chess board of his own making.

While David was going about attempting to control the facts of the matter at hand, God was observing each and every step of this squalid situation. So when David concluded that all was well again, God chose to intervene.

God intervened in the way that God often intervenes in the history of Israel—by way of one of the prophets. In this case it was Nathan who is tasked with confronting King David. He did this in a way that is very similar to one of the ways that Jesus so effectively caught the attention of his listeners. Nathan tells David a story.

It's a story about 2 men. One of them is so poor that his family has but one little ewe lamb that is so beloved by his family that it's treated like a member of the family, even eating from the family's own food supply. In fact as the story is told, this poor man even considered this lamb to be like a daughter to him. If you ask me, it sounds like this ewe lamb is like many dogs (and perhaps a few cats) here in Bozeman who are considered full-fledged members of the family.

The other man in this story is so rich that he had very many flocks and herds. Now a traveler came by the rich man's house. Knowing the hospitality he was to extend to this traveler, he was not at all happy about giving up one of his dozens of animals so that he could prepare a meal for the traveler. He spies the little lamb of his poor neighbor and takes it upon himself to snatch her away and kill it and prepare it for his visiting traveler.

So wrapped up in the story David becomes as he hears Nathan tell it, that he is incensed by the selfishness and arrogance of the rich man swiping the poor man's only animal and slaughtering it. David is outraged and takes on his familiar kingly role of judge and jury and declares, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." (2 Sam. 12:5-6)

After what had just happened by David's own scheming, you have to wonder if he even heard himself say, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die."

Nathan takes no time in saying to King David, "You are the man!"

David must have been dumbstruck by this declaration, for he says nothing as Nathan proceeds to lay out in excruciating detail all that David had done to despise the word of the Lord. It must have been a searingly painful experience to hear Nathan say out loud all of those things that David had so very carefully sought to obscure and hide. To hear all of this from God's prophet was a startling reminder that nothing at all is ever out of God's sight and awareness.

It's only after all of this that the David that is so well described in the stories and narratives from when he was a small boy to now begins to reemerge in an ever so subtle way. For as Nathan goes on in his indictment of David, David's arrogance and invincibility begin to slough off, and what is underneath begins to show again ever so slightly. It would be an affront to those he abused and murdered to say that David had become humble once again. But I do think that we can say that he was humbled.

David doesn't make excuses. He doesn't try to blame others. He doesn't try to minimize any of it when he says to Nathan. "I have sinned against the Lord."

Another King or leader might have become enraged at a prophet like Nathan for telling the truth so bluntly and may even have had such a prophet executed. Nathan's effectiveness with David is to frame the sins and failures of David in such a way that David comes to his senses and faces up to the reality of what he has done. He takes full ownership and responsibility when he says, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Pastor Monroe who I quoted earlier says, ". . . Nathan is successful when David confesses—for that is the true purpose of God's judgment. God judges us not to condemn us, but to transform us by bringing about repentance." (*ibid.* p. 5) God's judgement leads to our repentance that results in God's forgiveness.

So as we bring our consideration of this seminal story on the time line of King David to a close, we do so with renewed awareness of God's role in our lives when we fail or fall off the tracks. Yes, God is watching and observing that which we may not want others to see or know. That watchful role that God plays in our lives of faith serves to restore us to the way of righteous living in grateful response to God for our very lives.

Bathsheba will continue to appear in the Biblical accounts for a few more chapters in the ongoing story of David. It's worth noting that she is also referenced early in one of the gospel accounts of Jesus. In the first chapter of Matthew's gospel there is a genealogy of Jesus before the familiar stories of Jesus' birth that we read on Christmas Eve. In that lineage of Jesus we read, "And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." (Mt. 1:6)

And so as I ended part 1 of these reflections on the story of David and Bathsheba with a quote from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I do so again to wrap up this second and last part. "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:1-3)