2 Samuel 11:1-5,14-17, 26-27;12:1-9 - The Evil of Power

To place today's story into its historical setting we need to back up a little. Judah, one of Jacob's twelve sons and Joseph's older brother, married Tamar, a Canaanite. Following Judah's family line, eight generations later, Salmon married Rehab, the prostitute. She was the mother of Boaz who married Ruth. They became the parents of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

David is a beautiful and beloved child who lives into the call God issues. After various coming of age adventures, he succeeds and becomes the leader of his people. Like a figure in Greek drama, he begins to believe his own press and files for an exemption from the very Ten Commandments he triumphantly delivered in the Ark to his new capital city of Jerusalem.

The story of David and Bathsheba is first and foremost, a story about power and desire, but ultimately power and the horrible sin of David. Sometimes this fact is forgotten because it is hard to imagine. Remember who David is: the singer of psalms, the anointed king, the favourite one of God, the hope of Israel, and in Christian accounts, the defining ancestor of Jesus. Acknowledging the sin of David threatens our worldview. It shatters a vision in which saints and sinners can be neatly divided, a vision in which God works through the good actions of good people to establish peace and justice. If the Great King David sinned,

then the world is not like we thought it was.

Interpreters have found a variety of ways to help us forget David's sin. The other Biblical account of David's reign in the Book of Chronicles, takes the most direct approach. It simply leaves the story out altogether. Each Biblical writer of both New and Old Testament, wrote for a particular audience at particular time, addressing a particular situation, and they all wrote from passed down oral stories, many years and even generations after the fact.

Some less Biblical, but perhaps more influential interpreters have blunted the bite of sin by making this a tragic love story. The 1951 film, *David and Bathsheba*, with Susan Hayward and Gregory Peck, seems to say that whatever happened wasn't *really* sin, because they really, really loved one another. David was the sensitive, reflective king who just wanted to be loved for who he really was. Bathsheba was the lonely wife of an over-dedicated soldier. They fell in love! Love can't be wrong, or at least not very wrong. The event is remembered, but not as a sin.

Another interpretation remembers the story in a way that attributes the seduction, the sin, to Bathsheba, just like it did to Eve. She was bathing on her roof, after all. If the sin must be remembered, and remembered as sin, it can at least be blamed on the woman. Here is how the story began. David was staying in Jerusalem. The Ammonite threat persists, but David is now getting so settled and comfortable in his role as king,

that he no longer feels the need to go out and personally engage in the fighting. So he stays home, preying upon the people rather than serving them. Neglecting his day job, David has time for an afternoon stroll on his roof.

David sees Bathsheba, who is married to Uriah, the Hittite, the soldier. David knows from the start that she is the wife of another, a man in his own ranks. This fact should give him pause, but there is no hesitation. David acts swiftly and decisively. “He sent, he took, he lay.” The action is stark; no romantic words, no cuddling, no flirting, just action.

We see a real ugliness in David here. He, like all men of power, can have whatever he wants. He is at the culmination of his enormous power, and he takes, simply because he can. We do not know how willingly Bathsheba came. But it was the king who was demanding her presence. Following the tryst, she goes home. That’s it. There is no mention of love, no indication that David has any desire for an ongoing relationship. It looks like nothing more than a little kingly prerogative.

And then Bathsheba sends a messenger with two words that teach David the limits of his power. What David may have justified as being a strictly personal matter, threatens to become public. It all threatens to come crashing down when Bathsheba announces: “I’m pregnant.” Suddenly David’s world is spinning out of control. Those words detonate the next explosion in the chain reaction. If David can’t control pregnancy,

he can at least control who people think the father is. If she turns up pregnant while her husband is away, embarrassing questions will arise. If however, Uriah comes home and sleeps with his wife, the soon-to-be-born child will be assumed to be his own.

He sends for Uriah. “Go down to your house and wash your feet,” David tells him. That is: sleep with your wife so you and everyone else will think you are the father of the child who is already on the way. But Uriah won’t comply. This becomes academic, though, because Uriah refuses to enjoy the luxuries of home while the rest of the army is still out in the field. The contrast is unmistakable: Uriah, a Hittite, refuses the comforts of his own home when the Ark of the Covenant and the troops are in the field.

But David, the king who should be following that Ark and leading those troops, preys upon the homes, bodies, and marriages of his subjects. David invites Uriah to at least spend the night in the palace before returning to the front. Then he gets Uriah drunk in hopes that the man will drop his guard and go home to his wife. He doesn’t. Since David can’t control the actions of a righteous man, he can have him killed. David then writes a letter to his commander at the front, a man by the name of Joab.

In the letter he outlines a course of action explicitly designed to have Uriah die in battle. He seals the letter and gives it to Uriah to deliver at

the front! The chain reaction continues, more frightening than ever: neglecting royal duties leads to adultery, leads to lies, leads to murder, leads now to outright evil. Joab, on David's order, sends Uriah out to the front lines where he knows the fighting will be the heaviest.

Uriah is killed quickly. The plan works and David is off the hook. Given the overall arc of David's behaviour, his primary goal in eliminating Uriah is apparently to cover up his own sin with Bathsheba. With Uriah dead, and the allotted time of mourning is over, the king "magnanimously" invites the grieving widow into his palace to live under his own care, to join the other wives and concubines.

It looks as though David, might well live happily ever after. But, this part of the story concludes with: *But the Lord was displeased with what David had done.* The judgment of YHWH is unconditional. The thing is evil in YHWH's eyes.

God sends Nathan to David. Nathan enters to shake David out of what looks like a power-drunken stupor, but Nathan's method is sophisticated. He does not march in and confront David directly. Instead, he tells a story. The parable is rhetorically shrewd. A rich man had everything, but a poor man had nothing, save a little ewe lamb that he had raised as a member of his house. It was like a daughter to him, precious and irreplaceable. But, one day when a traveller came to the rich man, the rich man wasn't willing to take one of his own animals for the meal but

took the poor man's lamb as the dinner entree for his guest. The poor man has nothing else to his name and certainly no replacement for his lamb.

The bait is set and David seizes it: what the rich man has done is unconscionable. David is incensed and swears a rather elaborate oath in God's name that the rich man must restore the poor man's lamb many times over. The rich man will pay dearly; he may also have to pay with his life. As David slips into his role as judge, Nathan delivers the unexpected, startling blow: "You are the man!"

Then, Nathan declares God's word over the king. YHWH blessed David with rule over the kingdom, freedom from the grip of the former king, Saul, and dominance over the house of the former king, including his wives. At this point, the parable-teller speaks for YHWH who seems to be brimming with anger and hurt. Like a parent who feels betrayed by their child's behaviour, YHWH launches into an "after all I've done for you!" lecture. God's investment in David has been so great and God's disappointment so deep that the lecture even ends with the typical parental question: "Why?" "Why did you do it David?" "Why have you despised the word of God?" YHWH takes David's failure personally.

However, YHWH is not a parent who will be satisfied with a guilty expression and a sincere enough apology. God explains what David's punishment will be. There will be a sword over David's house, his family,

and his dynasty for all time. The unconditional covenant, previously extended by God, has not been revoked, but now there is the curse to accompany it. The reason for the brutal judgment of David's "house, his dynasty, are not solely due to adultery and murder, but are first and foremost because he "despised the Lord's word by doing what is evil in his eyes."

Now the amazing thing about David is that here, he seems to recognize his depravity. He does not try to explain. He does not protest the judgment. He says simply, "I have sinned against the Lord." Perhaps David realizes, not only that he has done something evil, but that as the anointed one, there is no such thing as a strictly personal action or a personal sin, one that has nothing to do with his public role as YHWH's anointed king.

David's manipulation of the military manoeuver in order to advance his own sexual interests are an explicit example of abused power. David utilizes his power as King to send an innocent man to certain death in order to satisfy his own immediate interest with Bathsheba. What is remarkable though, is that it takes Nathan's parable for the King to realize the gravity of the evil he has perpetrated. David had the legal capacity to satisfy his short-term desires, and he acted accordingly, without an ethical thought interrupting. He does not seem to realize the sin he has committed until it is expressed to him in more explicit terms.

When David hears: “You are the man!” and replies with a stunningly quick and brief: “I’ve sinned against the Lord,” it almost seems *too* quick, *too* brief. We’d like to hear David say more, be more contrite. We’d like to hear him beg for mercy and forgiveness. And yet, David doesn’t dissemble. He *confesses;* immediately, quickly, without excuse, in front of Nathan and God. There he is: Great King David, a man after God’s own heart, *an adulterous, murderous sinner*. And yet, there he is: adulterous, murderous, sinful David, *confessing.* Perhaps he is a man after God’s own heart after all because he is somehow able to hear God’s judgment and immediately accept it and the results that follow.

Perhaps the immediacy of David’s confession is what sparks the immediacy of his forgiveness. But even forgiveness can’t erase the damage that has been done and the judgment that has been announced. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the consequences just disappear, not when a baby is now gestating and a husband has been murdered.

We have heard David’s story, including his guilty plea and confession. But what about Bathsheba? Viewed from the perspective of Israel’s history that Samuel’s books reflect, its focus on the man, on David, the King, is understandable. But in doing so, Bathsheba, the woman in the story, the victim on multiple counts, gets overlooked. She becomes incidental to the story and, over time, even gets a bad rap from interpreters.

This is a story of rape and murder, of sexual misconduct of the highest order, an egregious abuse of power. Bathsheba, the victim has a story to tell that also places her solidly in the annals of history. Beyond her victimization, hers is also a story of courage and strength whereby she speaks for all people, both female and male who suffer abuse and have that suffering compounded as they are further victimized, doubly punished for the abuse they suffered.

Bathsheba is in her rightful place. She is having the ritual bath, the mikveh, required by law after her period. David, on the other hand is not where he is supposed to be. There's a battle going on and he is not at the head of his troops as his kingly role requires. He is taking the opportunity provided by his dereliction of duty to spy on a woman taking care of her private needs. An old adage says, "the devil finds work for idle hands to do." Said in another way; "if we are about the business to which God has set us, there is little room left for us to do what we ought not to do."

Bathsheba, like many others, responds to the voice of authority because she is required to do so, because of the hierarchical structure of her world, which places her on the bottom. When her abuse is compounded by an unwanted pregnancy, Bathsheba turns to David for help and is victimized further as her husband Uriah is murdered.

It is the story of poor women everywhere who because of their poverty

must turn for help to their abuser because she has nowhere else to turn. How do we respond when innocent ones are victimized? How can we, the church provide a place of safety and become a refuge for those who have been victimized? Sadly, the church itself has become an institution that has succumbed to some of the same challenges found in society. Abusers and victims exist side by side and many victims like Bathsheba, find themselves seeking help from the very ones who cause their situation.

Following Uriah's murder, Bathsheba is only referred to as "Uriah's wife" and eventually disappears from the story. So many victims are "disappeared," their stories are untold, their pain unrealized or ignored. It takes little imagination to see Bathsheba's situation and experience as similar to that of today's abused women or see each woman victimized as Bathsheba. We see this in the murdered and missing Indigenous women, human trafficking, domestic abuse, bullying of every sort. To see them we must be able to hear their cries for justice.

Bathsheba's situation as a victim of personal and sexual abuse and violence cannot be ignored in today's national concern with bringing such abuse and violence against women to an end. It is the plight of so many women across the world, especially women caught in the grip of poverty or political suppression, that they are subject to repeated victimization because they have no other options.

The story of David's adultery and murder reminds us of the deadly spiral of violence that can escalate from a single act. It brings to light the way in which female victims of violence are overlooked and continue to be placed within the power of their abusers. Even God, it appears, neglects to seek justice on behalf of women. But of course, the Bible is written from the man's point of view. But by chastising David and putting a curse on his house, there is justice for the oppressed as God takes action on behalf of Bathsheba.

Bathsheba, a woman in her society, was powerless to call David to account for what he had done to her. Whether recorded or not, God saw what had been done to Bathsheba. She too was a child of God, with all the rights and privileges of God's favour. And any word that speaks of divine justice is directed to all who have been abused and offers them justice whether or not they are called by name.

Things take time to change as history has shown over and over. But things do change and justice does win. It took hundreds of years to abolish slavery, capital punishment, at least in Canada, and physical punishment of children. By hilighting abuse and making society aware of its devastating long term effect; its ongoing source of pain that impacts the victims' personal relationships and other areas of their lives; its continuing mental agony; newspaper headlines have brought abuse in all its forms to the forefront. Victims are finally being heard as they seek justice.

Like so many of us, David tries to separate his personal and professional lives, his religious self from his public self. As it eventually does for so many of us, it threatens to tear him apart and destroy both of the worlds he inhabits.

As human beings in relationship with a living and demanding God, we cannot divide ourselves and our loyalties. We cannot be Christians on Sunday and non-Christians during the rest of the week. Our God does not accept the compartmentalization of our religious and secular selves. Even if we support mission work, bring lunches to shut-ins; if we take advantage of the weak; abuse our power; if we don't end victimization and abuse, we despise the world of our God. The good news is: God is always calling us back to integration, to be whole and undivided selves, united within ourselves in our commitment to God.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of forgiveness, you showed your servant David the error of his ways, and forgave him for his sins. Forgive us, and help us to see how we might live differently to honour you. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen**