

THE STORY OF A SCANDAL

Sermon preached by Edee Fenimore

July 30, 2006

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Whenever this scandalous story is told the tellers describe me as beautiful. And that is the truth. I was beautiful. Now I am an old woman, no longer called beautiful. But there was a day. I was beautiful. I had thick blond hair that I brushed so that it looked like spun gold. I had sparkling blue eyes. I had clear skin and a figure that drew the attention of men who passed by. There was a day.... but that day is long gone. Now the only hair that I pay attention to are the hairs that sprout from my chin and that I try to pull out so they stop their proclamation that I am old and no longer beautiful. My eyes are dull now and I can barely see the faces of the children that I love. My skin is covered with the spots that announce, "This woman is old." And that figure that once drew attention is hidden under the lumps and layers of too many meals and years. But there was a day. I was beautiful and though this story is not really about me, I know most of what went on those days when all the tongues were wagging.

My name is Bathsheba. I was beautiful in those days and I had a wonderful life. I was the daughter of Eliam. My grandfather, the father of my father was one of King David's advisors. Our family was well known and had a good reputation in the king's house and beyond. I was married to Uriah who was one of David's 30 best soldiers. So I had status or as much of that as a woman could have, in those days. You know how it was. We were the property of the men in our lives. It was as though, as a woman I was one of my father's possessions and then one of my husband's possessions. I did not know enough to think there was something wrong with that. It was that way for all women and I had a father that was good and kind and a husband that was the same so I was content with my life.

Then that day came that turned my life upside down. Nearly everything was different after that day. You know how the whole thing began, how the scandal began. I was taking a bath, a ritual bath to purify myself after my time of the month had finished. That was required of women who were to follow Yahweh's law. All the people of my father's household were followers of Yahweh, so I too followed the law that we believed was commanded by Yahweh. To love God and love one another meant we were bound by the laws of God. So this was not a relaxing time soaking in a tub filled with scented water. This was part of my obligation as a follower of Yahweh. If you want to know more about this ritual bathing it is all described in the fifteenth chapter of Leviticus in your Holy Scriptures. I only tell you about it so you will know that this was not a self indulgent act on my part.

Anyhow, there I was carefully purifying myself as directed in our laws. And unbeknownst to me, the king was resting on the roof of the king's house. It is cool there in the late afternoon and usually there is a breeze. I do not blame King David for being there. It was so pleasant. I will say there had been talk in the kingdom...questions asked, comments made behind hands. This whole thing happened in the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, yet David remained behind. Was that on the advice of others who knew the battles would be fierce and who wanted to make sure that David our king was safe? The Israelites had longed for a king, had wanted to be like other nations and we loved having David, so handsome, so strong, so talented as our leader. Or had David become caught up in the whole mystique of being king? Had the riches and the adulation and the power gotten to him? Had it all seduced him into thinking that he was entitled to anything that he wanted as a person or as a leader. Now as an old woman I think that is always the temptation that leaders face.

But let me get back to the story. I was doing my required ritual bathing and King David was on the roof of the king's house. From that roof anyone could see down into the enclosures behind the houses of the king's advisors and soldiers. Their homes were all clustered near to the king's house. King David saw me and after inquiring about who I was he summoned me to him.

Now, as an old woman who has seen much, I often ask myself if there was anything I could have done at that point, to have stopped the whole chain of events. That is always the question, isn't it? After we discover that we are part of a situation in which people are hurt or things go terribly wrong, we wonder if we could have done something to prevent it. Well at least at this point of the story, I am absolutely sure that there was nothing I could have done. That is mostly because it never would have occurred to me not to go when summoned by the king. I was one of his subjects. I was married to one of his best soldiers. And I was, after all only a woman. And so I went.

Could I have stopped these things once I was in the king's presence? Even today I am not sure. When one is in the presence of power and influence it is not easy to make the best decisions. What the king wants the king usually gets. And of course, after being with King David it was but a few days before I knew I was pregnant. I was one of these women that seem to know these things very quickly. All the signs were present and I sent word to David that I was going to have a child. David did not send any word back to me. He simply was looking at it from his perspective. So he sent word out to where his soldiers were fighting and he called for Uriah, my husband, to come home to Jerusalem and appear before him. David was crafty but had he asked me I could have told him that his plan to have Uriah come home and sleep with me so that the child could be thought of as Uriah's and mine... that plan would never work. But King David, so sure that in every decision he was right, did not ask my advice. And after questioning Uriah about the progress of the battle, said to him, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." In those days those words were said with a wink and a jab of the elbow and they meant, "Go and make love with your wife."

You know now what I knew then that Uriah would never come home for the comforts of a good bed and a beautiful wife, while the soldiers in his command remained in the fields. He remained with the king's servants and slept the night there at the door of the king's house.

When David heard that Uriah had not come to me he was furious. He could not believe that Uriah's loyalty and morality had bested the power of the king - his power. He did not give up. When it was clear to David that Uriah would not leave his place with the servants, David tried to get Uriah drunk, believing that if he were drunk all Uriah's high moral tone would disappear. So David invited Uriah to stay for several days and when that did not work, when David continued to sleep with the servants, King David sent word that to one of his commanders that fighting should begin again. He sent a letter, putting it in Uriah's hand to be delivered. That letter said that my husband, Uriah, David's loyal soldier, should be put in the very front of the troops that were fighting. King David ordered the death of my husband Uriah.

A scandalous story isn't it... the outcome of this abuse of power is found in your sacred writings. But why would this story be kept, why do we tell and retell the story? Maybe because David learned that what he had done was wrong, maybe because I began to question what I had contributed. But I think the bigger reason, the much more important reason is to show that no one ... no one is placed outside the love of God. For Yahweh continued to be active in the lives of all of us. Nothing...nothing...can separate us from the love of God. Thanks be to God.