

## **KING DAVID'S HUMANITY**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: II Samuel 11:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21

The story of David and Bathsheba is a timely story don't you think? I mean, it has been an interesting summer for those who have been watching the problems of political leaders whose judgment may be called into question. I'm not talking so much about the roundup of New Jersey mayors and officials not to mention rabbis accused of being on the take Thursday morning so much as the juicier scandals of the boudoir that have entangled so many politicians in recent months.

I suppose the most recent post-Clintonian wave of it started a year ago last March when Eliot Spitzer acknowledged his indiscretions with a woman whom he paid lavishly for sexual favors.

More recently the papers and pundits have been licking their chops over the erratic behavior of Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina who sought the charms of an Argentinean (or was it an Appalachian) woman with whom he says he is in love while he still loves his wife and four sons as well.

Not to be left out, our current governor and first lady in New York acknowledged early in his term that they separately have had an extramarital affair. And just this week no less a politician than Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi has acknowledged that he is "Not a saint." Not that anyone would have mistaken that fact!

The world has too few problems, evidently, that it should ignore the peccadilloes of its political leaders. Which is not to say that judgment and responsibility and trustworthiness are not qualities which should be considered when electing people to public trust. They should.

At the same time I am wondering what it is about us that we are so keen to know the juicy details about so many other people's indiscretions or downright sins, as if the power of sexuality was surprising to us, and has not made every single one of us at some point in life act somewhat irresponsibly when it comes to judgment. Do you not, after all, remember that you were once seventeen years old? Or twenty one. Or twenty five? Not that youth has anything to do with it. Berlusconi, after all, is 72.

I remember preaching on an issue related to marital fidelity not long after Jimmy Swaggart offered his tearful and soulful, "I have sinned" acknowledgement on nationwide television. I quoted a statistic about infidelity in America, and the prevalence of emotional and sexual wandering from a marriage or a committed relationship. And after the service a man in his seventies who was closing in on his golden anniversary of marriage, told me he had no patience with Swaggart. "I made a promise once to the woman I love," he said, "and I have never broken that promise." I was ennobled by his comment, and so are we all when someone can say such a thing.

We didn't discuss whether he'd ever been tempted; the *bottom line* was what mattered to him. "I made a promise," he said, "and kept it."

There are a lot of studies about fidelity in marriage. But one study of relationships found that 44% of men had at least one extramarital experience, and 25% of women had had at least one extramarital experience. In a more recent study, notable differences were observed between age cohorts, with younger generations more tolerant toward infidelity than older generations.<sup>1</sup> What makes the eye wander? What leads a person to forfeit the promise of fidelity?

A week or so ago in Chautauqua, I had lunch with a marital counselor who specializes in infidelity issues with couples. I asked him what is it that people say to him about why they have an affair. And he said, "Usually a third person comes along and sees something in the unfaithful partner that his or her spouse no longer sees or appreciates, so that the person who needs and wants that appreciation finds it in the new person."

All this is interesting I suppose from a general point of view, but the question for us is what does this have to do with the text read this morning? Was David's infidelity something about his marriage? Because certainly it tells us something about his character.

Let's set this in context. David, after all had eight wives not to mention Abishag, the teenage girl who was the warmth of David's bed in his advancing years. You can find the names of David's wives scattered in II Samuel and I Chronicles including Michal, Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah, and of course, Bathsheba. David fathered either eight or seventeen sons depending on which account you are reading, and who knows how many daughters. One of his sons was the great Solomon whose story is told in I Kings. But David's first child, the child he sired with Bathsheba died in infancy.

Polygamy, of course, was an unquestioned royal right in the days of David. But the mind does wander a bit when you think of keeping eight households going at once. If one marriage is difficult, what would eight concurrent ones be like? But I digress.

With all of that as back story, the setting in II Samuel is that David has taken Michal as the first of his wives. It was not a happy marriage in many respects. Michal was jealous of just about everything in a skirt in Jerusalem especially after that notorious wardrobe malfunction that occurred when David danced in a rather revealing ephod before the ark of the Lord when it was carried into the city and all the girls in town swooned. Michal gave David a piece of her mind about his moonwalking (so to speak), and from that time on David, sulked and ground his teeth at Michal's jealousy. It was not a happy marriage.

It comes as no surprise, then, that one day while walking on the roof of the palace David spied a woman bathing. A very beautiful woman, bathing. Now there are at least two readings of what unfolds after that. Both are feminist critiques of the story and plausible to our understanding.

One says Bathsheba was a poor innocent woman, the wife of Uriah, who was naively bathing on the roof of her building, unaware of the king's spying on her, performing her mikvah bath. When David sent for her, she had no options. A woman did not have the power to question the motives of the king, after all, he was the king, and if he chose to have an afternoon entente with her, who was she to refuse? She was powerless. In what court might she press her charge of coercion? So Bathsheba succumbed to David, unable to do otherwise, and David had his way with her as the most powerful man in Israel.

The other reading of this story, also a feminist perspective, is that Bathsheba knew exactly what she was doing, and therefore used the power of her youth and beauty to get what she wanted. In this reading she was as ambitious of power as David was desirous of her. She knew well that the king could see her bathing on her roof, and so she played her cards in the hope that he might be charmed by her wiles.

The plot now thickens, of course, regardless of your understanding of Bathsheba's intentions. The chance meeting brought an untimely outcome, and Bathsheba became pregnant with David's child. Or was that part of the plan? She sent word to David that all indications were that she was pregnant and no doubt she asked for David's help with her disgrace.

Bathsheba's husband Uriah was away at war and anyone who could count to nine would know that he was not the father of Bathsheba's child. Fortunately or unfortunately, Uriah was one of David's finest and most loyal soldiers. So David, looking for the expedient resolution sent word to the battle lines for Uriah to come home for a little R&R. He hoped that there would be a glad reunion leading to intimacy between Uriah and Bathsheba, thus covering up the pregnancy involved in David's adultery. But alas, Uriah was a righteous man, and he would not have pleasure with his wife while his men were in danger, such was his loyalty to them and to his king.

With Uriah uncooperative regarding Bathsheba, David was left with only one alternative, a sinister plot; make sure that Uriah never returned from the war. So he sent word that Uriah should be returned to the front lines where the fiercest fighting was taking place. And thus Uriah returned to action and was, as fate would have it, killed in the line of duty. Bathsheba mourned the obligatory time, and David sent for her to join him as his wife in the royal palace, which she did.

Now all of this is well and good, the kind of stuff that keeps Twitter abuzz, and TMZ going, that sells People magazine and ends up on Page Six in the New York Post, but what is there that is edifying about all this, and why, frankly, is it in the Bible? I mean if you had had the job of editor of the manuscripts of scripture and you knew that your job was to keep in the things that lift the soul and edit out the things that are questionable, seamy, and embarrassing, this would be one of the first things to go. Don't you think?

And while we're at it, you'd really want to pull the plug on a few other marginal stories as well. The homicide that stained Moses' hands, for instance; that Egyptian task master that he killed and that may have been the reason he was forbidden to enter the Promised Land with God's people.

You might want to pull out the references to Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines. I mean what does that say about family values?

And while we're mentioning Solomon, maybe we'd need to think again about keeping the Song of Solomon in the Bible, with all its sexual imagery and sensual poetry. At least keep the kids away from reading it!

You have to question the editing that kept some stories in the canon and did not keep others.

So why is this story of David in the Bible? I think, primarily, to remind us that he was only human. That all God has to work with are the likes of us, even the best of us, stained and imperfect, an odd mixture of dust and glory but ever and always human.

David, Israel's great king, is the model of the messiah and whenever the messiah is mentioned he is described as the Son of David, a great king like David himself.

But David was a sinner, pure and simple, tried and true. He had a dark side. He made a very bad choice that day on the rooftop looking at Bathsheba, setting the stage for the death of her husband, whose blood would be on his hands ever so indirectly and yet indelibly.

Walter Brueggeman, the Old Testament scholar, has said that "this narrative is more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

Because the truth of the matter is that even our most revered Biblical heroes and heroines are imperfect people whose humanity is a part of the story that is told about them. And if it were not, then they would never be an inspiration to us, so different would their lives be from ours.

The truth is that we all have David's darker nature within us, much as we like to dress it up and pretend it isn't there. The sin which lies so closely is a presence with which we all make an uneasy alliance.

The Manichaeist heresy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century was the idea that somehow by our own strength we could clean up our own act and banish evil from our lives. It didn't take long for that theological trial balloon to prove un-inflatable.

Paul told the Romans, "The good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do."<sup>3</sup> Now there's an honest confession of the situation with which all of us struggle.

And maybe that's the point of keeping this story of David in the Bible. After all, if gold can rust, what will iron do?

One of the illusions of our time is that we are perfectible. That our worst sins are only that we do not bundle and recycle our newspapers or separate our aluminum cans from the rest of the trash.

The first letter of Peter puts it in bald faced bluntness. Like a roaring lion, our adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. And while I know that that is not familiar cocktail talk, I also know that everybody in this place knows the truth of that stalking, because we have known within us temptation. The desire for the well turned leg, the form squeezed into the spandex at the gym, the pleasantness of the secretary who seems so attentive and approachable.

We know the agonizing struggle to stay clean and sober that so rivets the mind day and night.

We know what it is to be so focused on our own worth, financially speaking, so that we have substituted our net worth for our real worth, spiritually speaking, and thus displaced God, in whose eyes we find all our worth. We know a lot about temptation, putting things of lesser value in the place of that which is greater.

The reason that this story of David and Bathsheba is in the Bible is because we need to have a story or two that sounds and looks like ours in some respect, if we are to get the fact that underneath it all is a story about God and what God can do with even the broken pieces and imperfect edges of our lives.

It is an uneasy peace that we make with our humanity every day, odd mixture of sin and salvation, strength and weakness that we are. But God has taken human form and given us a savior so that we need not meet the trials of each day without direction nor without a God who is unsympathetic to our trials.

There is a prayer in our **Book of Common Worship**, a commendation meant to be said just before the benediction at a funeral. It reads,

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant *Jon*.

Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, *a sinner of your own redeeming*. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

Over the years I have said that prayer over the remains of every soul who has been a part of this congregation. And I say it, as I hope it will one day be said over me, not because any particular person has led a life deserving such condemnation that they should be called a *sinner* at their funeral, but because no matter how good or how imperfect any of us lives, those words are a reminder that our lives are lived in utter dependence upon the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God who does not wish that anything should stand between us.

Now don't let anything I have said this morning deter you from leading as faithful and as pure and as good a life as you can possibly live. But at the same time remember no matter how good, or how pure, or how faithful you may be, that goodness and purity

and faithfulness is exceeded by one thing: a God who loves us more than we can imagine and far more than we could ever earn. Which is why God has given us God's own self in Jesus Christ.

It's finally in the genealogy of Jesus that this story of David and Bathsheba comes to its ultimate and rather surprising conclusion. Because there, tucked into Matthew's version of Jesus' lineage is a reference that opens the possibility that from the most human and imperfect of origins the greatest of possibilities can emerge by God's grace.

Matthew wants to establish Jesus' Davidic line in order to show his messianic connection. And so in the middle of the genealogy there is a reference to Jesse, the father of King David, and David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah...all the way down to Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the messiah."

And there it is. From the least likely of beginnings to the most blessed of outcomes, because with God even our humanity is made new.

If God can do this much with David, then how much more can God do with us?

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<sup>1</sup> Treas (2002) quoted in **Infidelity** by Paul R. Peluso. (Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group) 2.

<sup>2</sup> **First and Second Samuel**, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 272.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 7:19 KJV