

“Romping with Royalty”

Salado UMC—29 July 2018: Tenth after Pentecost

Preaching Text: 2 Samuel 11:1-15—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“Adultery is the application of democracy to love”

H. L. Mencken—(1880 - 1956).

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We see King David’s public side beginning at 1 Samuel 16. The Lord selects David via Samuel from among Jesse’s eight sons. David becomes Israel’s new king. Later we read about David defeating Goliath, thus keeping the Philistines at bay. David soon unites Israel’s northern and southern kingdoms. Finally, David brings the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. We also read of his rule for the better part of four decades. These public portrayals prepare us for the more private aspects of King David.

Today’s lesson reveals another component of King David—a side we have not read about until now. Of course, if this story tells us anything at all it is that a whole host of influential modern people have fallen into King David’s trap. These include Herman Cain, former North Carolina U. S. Senator John Edwards, General David Petraeus, former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, former Florida’s U.S. Representative Tim Mahoney, and former South Carolina’s Governor Mark Sanford—do I need to name others? Our text shows us plainly how the mighty fall.

1 In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. 2 It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." 4 So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. 5 The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." 6 So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David.

7 When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. 8 Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. 9 But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. 10 When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" 11 Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." 12 Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, 13 David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him

drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. 14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. 15 In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (2 Samuel 11:1-15).

Our reading opens with a vital detail. "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . . David remained at Jerusalem" (11:1). This ominous sentence puts readers on alert. David would doubtless see action, but not the action his battlefield soldiers would see. For David something is not quite right. After all, David is a king who relishes fighting with lions and bears (1 Samuel 17:36). This is a king who kills a giant Goliath while the rest of the Israelite army stood back in fear (1 Samuel 17:48-54). These four words "David remained at Jerusalem" suggest a kind of betrayal. David has always been the king who fulfilled Israel's desire to "govern us and go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:20). Now David it appears will let others do his fighting. David's actions as Israel fights unravels the nation.

Our story begins simply enough with David's adultery. While his troops battle, David arises from a late afternoon nap. People in the Ancient Near East often used house roofs as we moderns might use our patios. Frequently, people bathed or napped on their roof. These activities probably had to do with the coolness of the second story of buildings. It also afforded privacy. Likely, still, the king's palace and its roof occupied one of Jerusalem's highest elevations. This height allowed David to "look down" from his roof to see a woman bathing. The text remarks serenely: "the woman was very beautiful." This phrase brings to mind the garden's first temptation. Genesis reads "So when the woman saw that the tree . . . was a delight to the eyes . . . she took of its fruit" (Genesis 3:6). Perhaps this is why Jesus once observed: "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes" (Mark 9:47)? David's next blunder was to act on the impulse of his vision of the woman.

David wanted to know who this beautiful woman was. An investigator revealed she was Bathsheba, Uriah the Hittite's wife. As king, David's power allowed him to summon Bathsheba to the royal house. She complied, but later will tell the king the only words Bathsheba speaks in the whole text: "I am pregnant." David's sin now takes a hideous twist—lust gives way to cover-up. Verses 14-15 outline David's scheme to dispose of his awkward difficulty. The first plan fails completely because David misjudges Uriah. As David has been unfaithful, Uriah is faithful. This eventuality David did not count on. David believed if he could persuade Uriah to spend just one night with his wife, then David's sin might go undiscovered.

Each plan includes Joab, David's right hand commander. First David has Joab invite Uriah visit Jerusalem and the king. David tells Uriah to "Go down to your house and wash your feet." Instead of having marital relations with his wife as David expected, "Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house." With many witnesses Uriah remained steadfast to his fellow soldiers by refusing to do what his fellow warriors could not do—have conjugal (sexual) relations during a military campaign. Uriah continued loyal to his oath as a fighter. Later David tried to make Uriah drunk so that he would then "lie with his wife." Again, Uriah remained faithful to his warrior's oath. "He did not go down to his house." Yet, Uriah's own faithfulness and loyalty proved to be his death sentence. Ironically too, David's unfaithfulness led to his kingly downfall.

Finally, David instructs Joab to place Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting. Joab obeys. The other valiant warriors draw back, and the enemy soldiers strike down Uriah and he dies. Finally, after three attempts David thinks his “problem pregnancy” is no longer a problem. After he sins against Uriah by taking his wife, David now takes this loyal Hittites’ life. David’s actions are plainly appalling. But at this moment David is still king and kings can do these things. Earlier Samuel had warned the people that kings took things. Now the events surrounding David, Bathsheba, and Uriah prove the old prophet Samuel to be absolutely—well . . . prophetic.

The Bible is unequivocally honest with regard to human sin. Too often in life a double standard operates. That is behavior we might condemn in one person, we might tolerate in another. Our tolerance or intolerance hinges on who acts out a particular behavior. Yet, the Bible plays no favorites as it tells the story of David and Bathsheba. Israel learns that no one—not even a king—is above God’s law.

Up to this point in David’s story, his ethics have been admirable. When he had the opportunity to kill his opponents, he did not. Also, at times, he honored Saul, his friend and adversary, by mourning him as a brother. The “public” David has maintained the virtue of a true leader—until the encounter with Bathsheba. Nevertheless, Bathsheba’s story betrays David’s other side. We can applaud the writer’s unflinching honesty in telling this story. This is a story that reminds us of Paul’s awareness of human folly. Paul wrote, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Even the Lord’s beloved, David, can slip morally/ethically. God calls all of us into account. King David is no exception.

Paul also wrote to the church at Rome that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This article of faith is a hallmark of both Jews and Christians. God, however, gives God’s people an opportunity to repent and begin anew. Leviticus provides measures for atonement of sin before God. Christians, too, have this opportunity in Christ. If God hears our penitent prayers, then God forgives. “Where there is forgiveness of these [transgressions], there is no longer any offering for sin” (Hebrews 10:18). God’s forgiveness of our sins is perhaps God’s most precious gift to God’s people. David learned this the hard way, but possibly we too can learn from him. Consequences for David will be our lesson for subsequent Sundays. Stay tuned!

As we continue our Pentecost journey to faithful discipleship, may we be faithful enough to confess our sin and ask for divine forgiveness. May we close our worship today with the quintessential prayer of penance, Psalm 51? It is King David’s beautiful plea for repentance and restoration. Let us pray:

**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.**

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit (Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12)