

“David and Bathsheba”  
delivered Sunday, July 19, 2009  
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
2 Samuel 11:1-15, 26-27

*Introduction of the Scripture*

Last Spring, when I plotted out my summer preaching series on the David narrative from First and Second Samuel, little did I know that the Governor of South Carolina would soon compare himself to Great King David. Nor did I know he would liken his current station in life to the story before us this morning of David and Bathsheba. When the Governor’s story broke, I was frankly grateful to have David and Goliath before me that Sunday, and then to leave town for a couple of weeks. But here we are before this text today. As we prepare to hear it, let me say at the outset, that this is only a story about Mark Sanford insofar as it is a story about all of us. This is our theological narrative that recalls a significant moment in our history as the people of God. Let us pray: O God, help us push past the assumptions we bring to this supposedly familiar text, and say something new to us today, relevant to our lives in our time. AMEN.

*The Reading of Scripture*

In every age, it would appear, we need characters to walk across the public stage for us, to view their complex mix of greatness and sheer humanity. We have this intrinsic desire to see others who are larger than life, upon whom we can project our own personal dramas in order to make sense of them. It is the gift of the arts - of theater, film, a good novel; It fuels our contemporary culture of celebrity which takes notice of each one’s fifteen minutes of fame. We need huge figures in public life like Michael Jackson – his sheer talent from a young age that opened many doors to the African American community to have a validated and central place in our American culture. We resonate with his vision of the world at one. We also need, frankly, to see how strange he was – the opulent lifestyle, the plastic surgeries, the struggles with addiction, the odd family arrangements. If nothing else, the most bizarre aspects of his life help us all feel quite a bit more normal. We need Harry Potter. To watch him and his friends on the Big Screen playing out those marvelous battles between the forces of good and evil, the tight Quidditch matches, the confrontations with the class bully, the tensions that are inherent in growing up. There is this need in all of us to lift the famous and infamous to some higher plane of existence, to put them into categories of celebrity or notoriety, of leadership and authority, and then from time to time to watch them stumble over their own clay feet, and fall back into the realm of sinful humanity with which we are most familiar. Upon them we cast our judgments, and in some aspect of them we can see a mirror image of ourselves.

That is who King David is for the people of Israel, for the people of God, for us as the drama of salvation unfolds. As we have dipped in and out of his narrative this summer, we have heard how the people begged God for a King so they could be like the other nations. In due time, the Lord chose David, the youngest of Jesse’s sons, the unexpected choice, the mere youth who felled the giant Goliath simply because he was the only one on the battlefield who remembered the Lord was on their side. David arose to be brilliant in war, in politics, even in city planning – Jerusalem, the great city of Peace, was his idea, after all. David was not only tough and smart, he

was sensitive and artistic – a poet and musician. Everything seemed to go David’s way. He was handsome, unusually blessed and gifted, and on top of all that – anointed by God to be King.

But below the surface of this amazing narrative of Israel’s greatest leader is the ever-present subtext, which is also the underlining truth of our lives – no human being is perfect...God alone is perfect. God alone is the sovereign ruler of life and faith. The story of David and Bathsheba is written in such bold strokes across the big screen projections of the Bible so we will never forget that – no matter how great the greatest King that ever lived is, he is human, and like all the rest of us, he is dependent upon the inexhaustible grace and mercy of the living God. This most infamous of all Biblical “sin stories” is the holy script upon which the very human nature -- of all of us -- is cast. The historian of First Kings remembers him: “David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything the Lord commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.”

It is Spring -- the time of year, the Bible tells us, when kings go forth to battle. Spring is also the time of year when the sun glows warmly on the earth and on the skin, and it feels good to be alive. So for some people, Spring is a time of violence. And for other people, it is a time for new life. For Bathsheba, Spring will be a time for both of these things: violence and new life. (1) Late afternoon David gets up from a nap and takes a walk on his roof. From there, he sees the beautiful woman who is taking a bath. He finds out who she is, sends messengers to get her and has Bathsheba brought to him. He saw. He sent. He took. He sinned. There is no long, tortured wrestling with his conscience. King David is at the height of his autonomy and royal power. There is no brooding caution for him. All of the action is his. That is until something happens that David cannot control. Scripture simply says, "The woman conceived." And "the woman" dismantles the great King David's power when she sends a terse note, "I am pregnant."

Moral drama at its best – the wonderful thing about the Books of Samuel is their honesty. The writer is willing for us to see the good and the bad of the beloved King David. We are allowed access to his successes and his failures. David’s offense of committing adultery is only the beginning of his terrible actions. His subsequent lies and attempts at a cover-up, as we all know, will make his first offense seem small given what follows. Anyone who has ever done something wrong or told a lie, and then has had to tell more lies to try to get out of it knows something about David’s predicament. Adultery will turn into murder, the further abuse of power, the complicity of many others, and the whole mess will be remembered forever as the moment when David forgot who he was, and forgot who God is.

If this is one of the largest stories of human sinfulness in all of scripture, then the line about God has to be the biggest understatement ever. “But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.” What *thing*? The *thing* with Bathsheba? – treating a woman as a piece of property to be possessed? The *thing* with Uriah? – stealing another man’s wife? Committing murder and getting the whole army to cover for him? The *thing* about the commandments? (2) The irony is that the Ark of the Covenant is out there on the battlefield, containing the Ten Commandments, and David’s whole kingship is based on protecting the law of God contained within them, and on one sunny afternoon he begins to break every single one of them. He breaks the first four by forgetting that God is God – and then the last six – he dishonors his family, he covets, he commits adultery, he steals, he bears false witness, and he murders. You know, I have sinned boldly in my life, but I have never knocked out the Big Ten in one fell swoop! And neither have you. But that is precisely why this story has been preserved in our biblical, theological tradition. It is not so much about this sin or that sin, it’s not even about warm-blooded sins like adultery or cold-hearted sins like the abuse of power and murder. It is about

remembering who we are – as human beings in relationship with the living God, as creatures who receive our life from the Creator, as flawed individuals in need of God’s judgment, as sinful people in need of God’s forgiveness.

There comes a moment when each of us must acknowledge, as much as we do not wish to acknowledge it, that our lives are accountable to God. And for all the excuses we bring to the fore to explain ourselves, and what we do, and why we do it, when you get right down to it, this is who we are: we are sinners who fall short of the glory of God, and we are ever in need of God’s love and justice, God’s mercy and forgiveness. The great Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, once made a quip about meeting God on the Day of Judgment. Buber said: “God will not ask me, ‘Why were you not more like Moses or Elijah?’ Rather, Buber said, “God will ask me, ‘Why were you not more like Martin Buber?’” That is *the thing* displeased the Lord about David. As he ascended to greatness – at the Lord’s behest and with the Lord’s blessing – he forgot who he was. He broke covenant with God. He lost sight of his relationship with God.

Someone has described our modern world as an environment of zero morality, like one of zero gravity. Just as astronauts must learn to navigate free-floating anywhere in the cabin of a space ship, so we must learn to live in a culture that operates in zero morality. Economic boundaries seem to expand indefinitely with little concern for those whom they overtake. All kinds of political avenues stand at an impasse because of greed and abuse of power. Ethical standards topple at the first breath of discomfort or the first sign of personal cost. In an environment of zero morality, like one of zero gravity, there is nothing to count on, nothing to hold on to, nothing to keep you from floating this way or that. (3)

And so the world around us might sometimes appear. But as people of faith, we do not live in a community of zero morality. We do not live under the Lordship of a God who does not care about the wrongs we commit. We are grounded in this story that is honest about human nature in all our sinfulness, and about a God who calls us nonetheless, and never gives up on us. David and Bathsheba remind us – we have a God who snags us back from that free-floating moral drift by judgment and displeasure and grace. In the face of honest self-examination, of repentance and confession, David's story will begin to change. Bathsheba loses her first child conceived with David, and both of them mourn mightily. Then, in the face of God's love, and a new birth, their future opens upon the blessed gift of Solomon, and then on down the line to moment in history, when in the City of David, to the house and lineage of David, unto us a child is born, a Savior has been given. David's sin is remembered and retold even there in the genealogy of Jesus where Bathsheba is listed simply as “the wife of Uriah.” But there, God's grace and forgiveness are what will take center stage. The scandal of the Bible is that God uses such flawed characters to be integral players in God's drama, without denying their failures, their sinfulness, and dysfunction; yet they still turn out to be so important in the story; they turn out to be kind of like you and me. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Kim Richter, “The Wife of Uriah,” Central Presbyterian, Atlanta, 7/24/94.
- 2) Jon Walton, “A Strange Mix of Darkness and Light,” Westminster Presbyterian, Wilmington, DE, 8/6/00.
- 3) “The Gravity of Grace,” Homiletics , July - September, 1997, p. 15.