

When Things Go Terribly Wrong

2 Samuel 11:1-15

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."

Our scripture today is one about something that no preacher, or for that matter, no one wants to talk about. However, if we listen to the current news at all, we hear about Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Dr. Larry Nassar, the current situation with the Boy Scouts of America, or the cover-ups of Catholic Church. We all know about the Me Too movement, an **effort to effect social change**. Originally founded in 2006, it became prominent both online and in the mainstream in late

2017, when several high-profile actresses opened up about their experiences with sexual harassment in the film industry. We all would like to think these things are going on in a galaxy far, far, away, but that is not the way real life is.

A prominent man in her congregation stopped by the office of commentator Shawnthea Monroe, one day and asked, "What is the church's stance on adultery?" Taken aback by the question, she hesitated. "Uh—we are against it?" The man responded, "Of course, but I would like to hear you preach on the subject." When this passage from 2 Samuel appears in the lectionary most preachers flip to the New Testament, hoping for a less dangerous text. There are good reasons to be wary of the topic of adultery. Garrison Keillor once quipped that when a pastor preaches about adultery, the congregation has only two questions: how long has the affair been going on, and who is it with? More seriously, one of the ethical requirements of preaching is that we do not turn the light of God's judgment on our congregation without standing with them—and adultery is not in everyone's repertoire of sins.

Unfortunately, adultery is more common than we'd like to admit, and it is not just the rich and famous who get caught in the trap. Estimated statistics vary, but many experts believe that between 30 and 50 percent of married people have engaged in sexual relationships outside of marriage. Adultery is also cited as a cause of many divorces. Preaching about infidelity runs the risk of alienating untold numbers; but silence on the subject seems like either approval or a lack of concern for what goes on in real life. **Shawnthea Monroe**

When we enter the story in 2 Samuel 11, we feel as if we have entered the second act of a Greek tragedy, a Shakespearean play, or a Wagnerian opera. The hero has providentially emerged from obscurity, defeated the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, served in the house of the ecstatic warlord, Saul, who had been anointed by Samuel as the one whom God favored to lead Israel. As David's fame

as a warrior surpassed his, Saul tried to swallow him into his household by giving him his daughter, Michal in marriage. David, however, saw that Saul was a troubled person, one who had no vision of the future role that Israel was to play in history. Indeed, Samuel recognized his error and secretly anointed David as king, which effectively revoked the authority of Saul, although Saul nevertheless sought to establish a dynastic monarchy on a warlord basis.

As Saul became more unstable, suspicious, and jealous, David feared for his life. He fled Saul's house, went into hiding, gathered his own army, and led them into exile. In time he made alliances with other opponents of Saul, even offering to fight with allies of the Philistines (although he refused to kill Saul when he had the chance, due to his honoring of the fact that Saul had been anointed). Gradually Saul not only began to fade as warlord; he abandoned any residual trust in God and turned to a witch who conjured up the soul of the now-deceased Samuel. When Saul inquired as to his destiny and was abruptly told that he would lose a battle against David's allies, he (and his son) committed suicide.

David, meanwhile, gradually built a coalition that had the marks of an emerging empire and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, uniting the country religiously. He established a standing army, installed court officers and a new priesthood, and made provisions for the administration of justice through governors and vassal kings. Bloody struggles against some enemies persisted, to be sure, even after Saul's death, but a rather secure rulership was established, and he was grateful to God. **Max L. Stackhouse**

Today's is an amazing passage, a well-told tale that marks the turning point for 2 Samuel, where David goes from being the anointed one to the grasping one. The story begins with a succinct description of a king grown complacent. David has become so successful in his military campaigns that he no longer even bothers to fight. While his officers lead "all of Israel" out to battle the Ammonites, David idly

lounges around the palace (v. 1). Then it happens: David sees a beautiful (and naked) woman bathing in a house nearby, and he is filled with lust. David has become the type of ruler who expects everyone to cater to his whims. Although David already has seven (7) wives, and she is the wife of another man, David wants Bathsheba. The Hebrew says literally that "David sent messengers to take (*laqakh*) her" from her home to the palace, to connote force rather than consent. Acting on desire alone, David sends for her, takes her and lies with her, and then sends her home.

We do not know what Bathsheba thought of all this. We only know she complies with the request of her king. Imagine what it is like for Bathsheba when officials from the court show up at her door demanding that she come with them. Since David had to inquire who she was, it is clear that the two have had no prior personal acquaintance. The royal summons must in itself be an anxious event for Bathsheba. She has no choice in the matter. A woman in a patriarchal society cannot refuse what the king commands. Given David's power and position, it is hard to imagine that Bathsheba could have said no. The same thing happens every day in the United States, where people with power coerce others into unwelcomed relationships. For instance, this is a particular problem in the U.S. military, where the rape of enlisted women (and men) has become an epidemic. My mother understood this fact 50 years ago when she advised me to go to college rather than joining the military. In an era when we strive to protect our children from sexual predators and teach our sons and daughters that "'No!' means 'No!'" the story of David and Bathsheba opens the door to this timely and critical issue.

Our scripture is before the 1960's and the "pill." After David has satisfied his lust, the bad news arrives: Bathsheba is pregnant. As the result of one impulsive act, suddenly events are spiraling out of David's control. What follows is a series of increasingly desperate attempts to cover up his crime of adultery by hiding the

source of Bathsheba's pregnancy. David, he knows he has done such great wrong that he tries to hide it by getting Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba.

Consider Bathsheba's distraught state upon finding herself impregnated by the king. How will she explain it to her husband Uriah, who, since he has been away in the armed service, will know the child is not his? If she reveals who the father in fact is, what might King David do? He might deny his involvement and command that she be killed as someone undercutting his regime with her unfounded charges. Should she run away? Commit suicide? We do not have a diary or journal of Bathsheba to tell us her exact thoughts and feelings. We know this: a sexual act that was imposed upon her has caught her in a tangled web.

David calls Uriah, her husband and one of his own trusted warriors, back from the war, expecting Uriah to "go down to his house," but Uriah will not go. He tells David it would be a violation of his covenant with his men. Next, David gets him drunk, hoping Uriah will forget about his men and "go down to his house"; but Uriah will not go. It turns out Uriah is a more principled man than David. So, David does the unthinkable. He sends Uriah back to the front lines with a message for Joab: make sure Uriah dies in battle.

This passage is first and foremost a sad story of power's corrupting influence. David has risen so high that he thinks he is above the demands of the law. Bathsheba's pregnancy reveals his infidelity, so David uses his power to "solve" the problem. One false step leads him down a path where he ends up with blood on his hands.

We should also note that David does not have murder on his mind when he looks out over the city and spies Bathsheba. He simply acts on impulse and desire—then all hell breaks loose. In the same way, most people who have had affairs did not intend to hurt anyone. Despite David's story, adultery usually does not begin in bed; it begins over lunch, over drinks, or online. These small but

exciting interactions seem harmless, but they can quietly undermine our most important covenantal relationships and cause untold damage—to our spouses, to our families, and to ourselves.

People try to justify adultery in different ways. They rationalize it: "My marriage is basically over." "My needs are not being met." They romanticize it: "This is not adultery because we are truly in love." They normalize it: "Everyone is doing it, so what is the harm?" In the final analysis, the verdict is clear: adultery is never acceptable. Even a favored son like David is not above this law, and when he crosses the line, the consequences are dire. **Shawnthea Monroe**

Even David, the ancestor of the messianic line of kings, to whom God promised an unbroken line of descendants, ruling "forever" (2 Sam. 7:8-16), is portrayed as sometimes faithful, sometimes not. David rules by the grace of God rather than by his own merit, and the duration of his dynasty is due not to his faithfulness but to the enduring faithfulness of God. **Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer**

Nearly a thousand years after King David's death, the phrase "son of David" is used as a title for Christ. It appears no fewer than fifteen times in the Synoptic Gospels, and the evangelists associate David's name with God's promise to establish a permanent covenant with the king's dynasty.

David's many good accomplishments, however, do not excuse the evil he did to Bathsheba and Uriah. They do not prevent asking a thorny question: in a society that suffers the scourge of date rape and sexual abuse, what are the theological implications of designating Christ as "the son of David," as the son of a king who raped a man's wife and then devised a scheme to have the innocent husband killed?

The answer lies in the character and nature of Christ. His acceptance of women who minister to him and his appearing to them on the first Easter honors and empowers women. Christ acts in exactly the opposite manner from King David at his worst. Christ transforms the meaning of "son of David," not by filling the title

with his predecessor's lust and abuse of power, but by extending David's compassion and justice to all women and men alike. Being called the son of a highly imperfect ancient king while redefining the meaning of that title is an act of revelation, an admission that the past does not control the new moment that is at hand in Christ. Christ is historically related to King David, fulfilling God's promise of a permanent covenant with the house of David, but Christ brings the wholeness and health of God's reign, a realm in which there is no more rape and murder. To call Christ "son of David," while remembering the evil as well as the good that King David did, is to affirm that God enters the mess of human history in order to redeem the world. Christ, the "son of David," gives us a more perfect kingship than David or any other mortal ruler could ever achieve. **Thomas H. Troeger**

So, what does the church think about adultery? We are against it. Why? Because adultery is a sin and affects us all...a fact that many of us know from first-hand experience...it affects our marital relations, our children, our walk with God! However, we need to hear the whole truth: that sin and grace walk hand in hand. Yes, adultery is a sin, but fortunately God is in the sin-forgiving business.

Shawnthea Monroe

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