

“Whoops!”

25 July 2021: Ninth after Pentecost

Preaching Text: 2 Samuel 11:1-15

Salado, Texas 76571

+++++

“Adolescence is the stage between infancy and adultery”—Unknown.

+++++

King David’s public presence begins at 1 Samuel 16. Yahweh selects David from among Jesse’s eight sons to be Israel’s new king. Later, David defeats Goliath in another call story. David soon unites Israel. Finally, David dances the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and rules for 40 years. Yet, these public portrayals hardly prepare us for David’s private aspects.

Our lesson reveals another element of King David—a side we have yet to see. Plainly, if this story tells us anything, it is that even influential moderns fall into the same trap. These include Gen. David Petraeus, past SC Governor Mark Sanford, and Bill Cosby. The Me-Too movement named many others! 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 key detail. "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . . David remained at Jerusalem." This ominous sentence puts us on alert. For David, things are 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 stands in fear (1 Samuel 17:48-54). These four words "David remained at Jerusalem" suggest betrayal. David has fulfilled Israel's stated desire: "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.

Our story begins with David's adultery. While his troops battle, David arises from a late afternoon nap. People in the Ancient Near East used roofs as we use patios. Often, people bathed or napped on roofs. It was cooler on the second story and also offered privacy. Likely, the king's roof occupied one of Jerusalem's highest elevations and permitted David to "look down" to see a woman bathing. The text notes: "the woman was very beautiful." This phrase brings to mind a garden temptation: "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 said: "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 acting on his vision.

David asked who this beautiful woman was. A sleuth soon revealed she was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah. As king, David's summoned Bathsheba to the palace. She complied, but later will tell the king: "I am expecting [sic]." 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 entirely. David misjudges Uriah. As David is unfaithful, Uriah is faithful. This was a prospect David hadn't counted on. If David could persuade Uriah to spend just one night with his wife, then David's sin might well go unobserved.

Plans for the coverup include Joab, David's commander. First, Joab invites Uriah to visit Jerusalem. David tells Uriah to "Go down to your house and wash your feet." Instead of marital relations with his wife, "Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house." Witnesses see Uriah steadfast to his soldiers by refusing to have relations during a military campaign. Uriah was loyal to his fighters. Later David tried to make Uriah drunk so he would "lie with his wife." Yet, Uriah remained loyal. "He did not go down to his house." Yet, Uriah's own loyalty proved his death sentence. Tragically, David's infidelity led to his downfall.

Lastly, David instructs Joab to place Uriah in the front of the fighting. Joab obeys. The other warriors draw back, and the enemy strikes down Uriah and he dies. Finally, after three attempts David thinks he has concluded his "problem pregnancy." After he sins against Uriah by taking his wife, David now sacrifices this loyal Hittites' life. David's actions are plainly appalling. But David is still king and kings can do such things. Earlier Samuel warned that kings took things. These events involving David, Bathsheba, and Uriah prove the old prophet Samuel to be absolutely—well . . . prophetic.

The Bible is candid regarding sin and plays no favorites. Israel learns that no one—not even the king—is above God's law. Up to this point in David's story, his ethics have been more or less admirable. When he had the opportunity to kill his opponents, he did not. Also, at times, he honored Saul, sometimes friend and sometimes adversary. David mourned Saul as a comrade. The "public" David maintained the virtue of a true leader—until his encounter with Bathsheba. Still, Bathsheba's story betrays David's dark side. We can applaud the writer's persistent honesty in telling this story—one 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, David, the Lord's beloved slips morally/ethically. God calls all of us into account. King David is no exception.

Paul likewise 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 days.

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 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)

David N. Mosser, SUMC, Salado, TX 76571