

2 Samuel 11 – 12:7a

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle,

Apparently, the spring of the year during the time of King David – around 1000 BC - was something like the baseball season – it was a time for wars and pennant races to begin – perhaps after the winter rains and when the weather would be cooperative. Couldn't have your chariot wheels get stuck in the mud. So –

David dispatched Joab and his fighting men of Israel in full force to destroy the Ammonites for good. They laid siege to Rabbah, but David stayed in Jerusalem.

Having been a fairly successful King, David decides to sit this campaign out...he's getting older, perhaps sees the folly of exposing himself to danger, and instead sends young men out to fight his battles. This war against the Ammonites will be a siege war – David's army camping in tents outside a fortified city – maybe making periodic runs at the walls – maybe just waiting the residents of Rabbah out until their food and water supplies force a surrender – Either way, by this time in his career, David is getting used to living in a palace not a tent.

But you see, one of the duties – one of the expectations of people was that the King would personally lead his men into war...– if you want your country to go to war – Kings were expected to be there leading the charge....it was one way in which wars were avoided. Perhaps not a bad idea before any nation goes marching off to war. But here we read that David stayed behind – oh, if only he hadn't then none of this might have happened but he stayed and that led to the next problem.

<sup>2-5</sup> One late afternoon, David got up from taking his nap and was strolling on the roof of the palace. From his vantage point on the roof he saw a woman bathing. (This occurred during the time of "purification" following her period.)

Meaning that Bathsheba was engaged in a ritualistic bath – a purification rite that women were required to do after their monthly period. This was not some attempt to seduce the King – such a bath may even have been done while at least partially clothed. It was a way in which Bathsheba wanted to remain faithful to the laws of Moses – even if David would soon prove that he did not.

The woman was stunningly beautiful. David sent to ask about her, and was told, "That is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite."

Now, hearing the word “wife” should have ended right there, shouldn’t it...but

David sent his agents to get her.

Doesn’t appear to have been much in the way of hesitation. The King sees something he wants and sends for it...never mind that he’s married (to 8 wives when all is said and done) and has a stable of concubines...never mind that she’s married and David knows it. There goes Commandments # 10 and 7 out the window.

There is no evidence that Bathsheba knew why she was being summoned. But summoned she was – and you don’t beg off when the King commands.

After she arrived, he lay with her.

This being a polite way of saying – he had sexual relations with that women.

Then she returned home.

So it was, in effect, a one night stand. David got what he wanted and Bathsheba was shown the door. Unlike the Hollywood version with Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward – this was not about love- not about two

misunderstood people trapped in unhappy marriages – this was about lust and the power and arrogance of a King who thought he could do anything he wanted – because he was The King.

Before long she realized she was pregnant and sent a message to David to tell him.

Problem pregnancy? So what is David's plan?

His first thoughts were not about accepting responsibility – not about concern for a woman or an unborn child – but about how I get out of this little public relations problem that might occur.

<sup>6</sup> David then got in touch with Joab: "Send Uriah the Hittite to me." Joab sent him.

<sup>7-8</sup> When he arrived, David asked him for news from the front—how things were going with Joab and the troops and with the fighting. Then he said to Uriah, "Go home. Have a refreshing bath and a good night's rest."

It was an invitation to do what comes naturally when a soldier returns to his wife after being away for months at a time. Clearly, David is hoping that responsibility for a pregnancy can be shifted to Uriah -

<sup>8-9</sup> After Uriah left the palace, an informant of the king was sent after him. But Uriah didn't go home. He slept that night at the palace entrance, along with the king's servants.

Whoops – Plan A was a flop.

<sup>10</sup> David was told that Uriah had not gone home. He asked Uriah, "Didn't you just come off a hard trip? So why didn't you go home?"

<sup>11</sup> Uriah replied to David, "The Chest (the ark of the Covenant) is out there with the fighting men of Israel and Judah—in tents. My master Joab and his servants are roughing it out in the fields. So, how can I go home and eat and drink and enjoy my wife? On your life, I'll not do it!"

Rats- thinks David – a man of integrity – just what I need now!

<sup>12-13</sup> "All right," said David, "have it your way. Stay for the day and I'll send you back tomorrow." So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem the rest of the day.

The next day David invited him to eat and drink with him, and David got him drunk.

Plan B – let's get him roaring drunk and see if his inhibitions and conscience might be lowered a bit.

But in the evening Uriah again went out and slept with his master's servants. He didn't go home.

Now the events take a dark, deep, sinister step from which there is no return -

<sup>14-15</sup> In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front lines where the fighting is the fiercest. Then pull back and leave him exposed so that he's sure to be killed."

Commandment # 6 experiences the same fate as 7 and 10.

<sup>16-17</sup> So Joab, holding the city under siege, put Uriah in a place where he knew there were fierce enemy fighters. When the city's defenders came out to fight Joab, some of David's soldiers were killed, including Uriah the Hittite.

<sup>26-27</sup> When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she grieved for her husband. When the time of mourning was over, David sent someone to bring her to his house. She became his wife and bore him a son.

Looks like Plan C is going to work... BUT BUT

<sup>27-3</sup> But GOD was not at all pleased with what David had done, and sent Nathan to David.

There are a couple of important things to note about this meeting of David and Nathan.

Nathan is, of course, a prophet – remember that prophets are not fortune tellers or tea readers – Old Testament prophets are people who talk about God's desires – who talk about behavior and consequences – who are empowered to speak God's truth to culture's power.

It also appears that Nathan is a personal friend of David. One of David's sons is named Nathan – it is Nathan to whom David confides that he wants to build a temple to God in Jerusalem – it is Nathan who will name David and Bathsheba's second son and it is Nathan who stands by the King when there is an attempted coup. So Nathan

has a relationship with David that must have caused him some grief as he comes to realize what his King and his friend has done.

Nevertheless, his role is clear – prophet and spokesman for God first – friend of the King – second.

Perhaps it is because of his friendship – his knowledge of how David might react – that Nathan does not come in full of righteous indignation – he does not come in with both barrels blazing – ready to slap David upside the head saying: You IDIOT - WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

Instead he comes to David with a story:

Nathan said to him, "There were two men in the same city—one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep, herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little female lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him.

<sup>4</sup> "One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal to set before his guest."

So, David, What Do You Think of This?

<sup>5-6</sup> David exploded in anger. "As surely as GOD lives," he said to Nathan, "the man who did this ought to be lynched! He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess!"

Well, David - be careful what you say because  
Nathan replies:

<sup>7-12</sup> "You are that man!"

So why do you think that this story is important?  
What do you think this whole episode means to you? Am  
I insinuating that you might be that man or woman? I am  
fairly certain that most of you have not committed  
adultery, coveted your neighbor's wife or been successful  
in getting someone killed.

Is this a story that is simply there so that we might  
be able to condemn those who have?

It takes no great stretch of the imagination to  
identify a significant number of powerful men who may  
come to mind as I read this story of David, Bathsheba,  
Uriah and Nathan. Perhaps names like: Clinton, Ensign,  
Sanford, Spitzer and Edwards might have a place on that  
list. People who took advantage of their position of  
power- broke vows of commitment – shattered  
relationships – and tried to then cover it up or shrug it off.  
They join a parade of characters who demonstrate that  
throughout history many attempts have been made to  
cover up immorality, incompetence and crimes as early  
as the first cover up with fig leaves in the story of Adam

and Eve to Watergate, Lewinsky and weapons of mass destruction.

The temptation of course is for us to think- like the Pharisee in the temple – well, at least I'm not like that sinner over there! But of course, we are or certainly can be. It is even more likely that we might fail in our responsibility to be a Nathan – to speak up when we note injustice or abuse of power.

While stories of adultery, sex and murder typically get our attention, I think that the reason this story is in the Bible is not because of the specific offenses – but because of the **attitudes** that generated the offenses - the attitude that the powerful can take what they want – that the rich can abuse the poor. The attitude that if you are rich enough or powerful enough or clever enough you can cover up any indiscretions with impunity.

This story says: Hold on there: You simply cannot think that you can get away with anything – that your actions will go unnoticed – that it doesn't matter. There are at least two parties who know about what has happened. God knows and more importantly – you know.

You know when you've taken advantage of someone in a more vulnerable position. You know when you've invented ways to escape responsibilities. You know when you've manipulated people or situations to fulfill your interests or desires. You know when you've sent out others to fight your battles while you stayed in the safety of your comfortable living room. You know when you have failed to stand up and be the kind of person God wants and needs you to be.

And in this case David knew. In stunned silence he now listens to the indictment and to God's disappointment and frustration.

<sup>13-14</sup> Then David confessed to Nathan, "I've sinned against GOD."

Tradition has it that David writes a psalm at some point in time acknowledging his behavior. It is Psalm 51 which goes like this:

### **Psalm 51**

**<sup>1-3</sup>Generous in love—God, give grace! Huge in mercy—wipe out my bad record.**

**Scrub away my guilt,  
soak out my sins in your laundry.**

**I know how bad I've been;  
my sins are staring me down.**

**<sup>4-6</sup> You're the One I've violated, and you've seen  
it all, seen the full extent of my evil.**

**You have all the facts before you;  
whatever you decide about me is fair.**

**I've been out of step with you for a long time,**

**What you're after is truth from the inside out.**

**Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life.**

**<sup>7-15</sup> Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean,  
scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.**

**Tune me in to foot-tapping songs,  
set these once-broken bones to dancing.**

**Don't look too close for blemishes,  
give me a clean bill of health.**

**God, make a fresh start in me,  
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.**

**Bring me back from gray exile,  
put a fresh wind in my sails!**

Now it would be nice to say that from that point on everything turned out nice and rosy for the repentant David. That God was content to say: "There, there – it's OK – everything is forgotten." But it wasn't.

The behavior was forgiven, but the consequences of the behavior had lasting effects. David and Bathsheba's baby died - there would be trouble in the royal family - other sons would rise against father and there would be brother against brother where war and unrest would hurt innocent people as do all wars. There would be incest and more murders, crippling disease and eventually the death of a tired, old King. But David and Bathsheba would have a second son who would continue his father's reign, build a magnificent Temple and whose wisdom would become legendary. His name was Solomon. And, of course, in tracing the family tree – there would eventually be a descendent named Joseph and Jesus.

The story in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel is one that developed over many years, with re-writes and editorial additions. The reign of David is chronologed by different historians with different points of view – some of whom leave out this story completely preferring an heroic David rather than a flawed one.

At the same time if we were to draw conclusions about the nature of God or the reign of David based on this story – it would be “the same as walking into a theater

in the middle of a movie and leaving ten minutes later thinking we had a handle on the whole story.” (John Jewell)

Instead, I would invite you to remember the reasons why this story has meaning for each of us.

Remembering:

That we can never succeed by covering up our behaviors or failing to speak truth to power.

That all behaviors will always have consequences.

That being in a position of power (no matter how small or insignificant it may seem) carries responsibilities and not privilege.

That we might very well be the people God chooses to be the tools of correction – not necessarily with guns blazing or marching in the streets – but as the tellers of stories like Nathan– or like Jesus and his stories of a lost son who is welcomed home by a gracious father or a Samaritan who binds the wounds and cares for a stranger.

And finally, That it is only through the admission  
of our mistakes and the work of restoring our relationships  
that

**God, can make a fresh start**

**can shape a Genesis week from the chaos of our  
lives.**

**Can Bring us back from gray exile,**

**can put a fresh wind in our sails!**

Let us pray:

Dear God, give each of us the courage to look  
within ourselves – confront those things which create dark  
shadows in our lives and experience the fresh wind which  
reconciliation can bring. Amen.