

## Thou Art the Man

David, the son of Jesse, is one of the most complex and compelling characters in the Bible. We remember him as the shepherd boy who became the king of Israel; the youngest son who was left in the fields with his father's sheep when the great prophet Samuel came to town looking for a candidate to replace King Saul and ended up being anointed, rosy cheeks and all, much to his family's surprise. We remember him as the teenager who audaciously offered himself as Israel's champion against the giant Philistine warrior Goliath and who triumphed over armor with a slingshot. We remember him as the young musician, brought into the palace to soothe the increasingly psychotic Saul's fits of darkness and rage. We remember his loyal friendship to Jonathon, Saul's son and heir, who stood to inherit the throne David had been promised. We remember him as the Psalmist, who is credited with the beautiful words of the most loved passage of Scripture in both Testaments: "The Lord is my shepherd/I shall not want..." We remember him as Israel's most glorious King, who defeated the enemies of the Children of Israel and made their inheritance in the Promised Land whole and safe for one of the only times in their history. We remember that he danced with joy when he brought the Ark of the Lord into his city. We remember that he was called, by Samuel and later by Paul, "a man after God's own heart."

But we tend to forget, or at least try to forget, some of the less exemplary parts of David's story. He did not always base his kingship over Israel on God's Law but often acted just as the kings of the other nations acted. He took many wives to solidify political alliances. He conducted a census, contrary to the word of God, and levied harsh taxes. He became a typical Eastern potentate, taking what he pleased and allowing others to do the hard work. And so, in Second Samuel 11, we read that "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." It is the beginning of the story of David's greatest sin: his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, his faithful soldier, Uriah the Hittite.

It is never easy for us to discover that our heroes have feet of clay. There is a powerful temptation to divide the world as we know it into good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains, sinners and saints. Consider how quickly some of those who are lionized in the press are cast aside as unworthy, especially in the realm of sports. In 1998, Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa were at the top of the baseball world as they pursued one of the most storied records in sports: Roger Maris' 61 home runs in a single season. They were such appealing figures – McGwire the California boy with the lumberjack physique, devoted to his young son, a champion through his foundation of abused children; Sosa the happy-go-lucky Dominican who started each home run trot with a hop and blew kisses to the crowd. They were credited with "saving baseball" after the 1994-1995 players strike and the fiasco of replacement players. Together, it seemed, they had re-ignited the American passion for baseball, bringing people back to the park after the attendance slump following the strike. Yet within a few short years, they were out of the game and reviled as cheaters, steroid users who had tarnished the game they had previously been credited for burnishing bright. Respected baseball writers, some of them the same ones who had lauded Sosa and McGwire to the skies, have said that neither of the two will ever be voted into baseball's Hall of Fame, despite their record-shattering performances and overall fine careers.

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But we are unable to take this simplistic approach to King David – the Scriptures will not allow it. When no less an authority than St. Paul proclaims David to be “a man after God’s own heart,” in full knowledge of the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of his career, then we must stop to consider just how delicate the line is between saint and sinner, hero and villain. The lesson in the story of David and Bathsheba is not as simple as “how the mighty have fallen” or how to lose God’s favor in one easy misstep. As we consider this story this morning, I want to bring our attention to three possible lessons for us: how echoes of David’s sin are still present in our lives and in our society, how the prophet Nathan is a role model for us, and how, like David, we are called to rise again when we fall, relying on the grace of God and the love of Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to restore us to lives that honor the Image of God in which we are created.

David’s sin with Bathsheba did not come about without previous warning signs in his life. He had reached the point in his career where he no longer went into the field with his army. He had grown used to the good life in the palace, apparently, one where it was all too easy to have his whims fulfilled. Rather than putting his own life on the line in the service of God’s people, he had become willing to let others do the hard and dangerous work while he reaped the benefits. And so he was at home taking his ease on that late afternoon when he decided it was time for a stroll on the palace roof. From his vantage point, high above all the other buildings in the city, he saw something he wanted. It didn’t matter that the “something” was a human being, the wife of one of his warriors. He saw something that aroused his appetite and he sent for it and he took it. There was no consideration for the feelings of Bathsheba or Uriah, no thought of how his loyal subjects might react, no thought to God whom he had served all his life. It was a matter of David’s instant gratification. It was an act fully devoted to selfish impulse.

Here in America, our lives, like David’s, are far from the lives lived by the peasant farmers who were the common folk of all lands for millennia. Indeed, not even David or Solomon could have dreamed of the richness of the life we lead. Few of us still make a living by the literal sweat of our brows; sitting at a computer for 40 hours a week is a poor equivalent to the sunup to sundown manual labor of a farmer. Luxuries unknown to our grandparents are commonplace to us – multiple telephones, televisions, computers and cars for each household. Like David for his time, we equate well to the rich man with many flocks in Nathan’s parable. Of course, we would never dream of stealing from a poorer neighbor to support our affluent lifestyles, would we? But sins of selfishness like David’s do not have to be personal; they can also be systemic. What might examples of such systemic sin be? How many of us, I wonder, receive investment income from companies that, unbeknownst to us, have cut wages, laid off workers or moved operations to other states or even countries in order to protect “the bottom line,” disrupting or ruining scores of lives in the process? Or how many of us have purchased tomatoes during the winter months, unaware that the vast majority of winter tomatoes in the U.S. come from a region of Florida where many of the farms have been implicated in the scandal of modern slavery and where the average farm worker income is \$8,500 a year?

If, like me, you are troubled by these questions, consider encouraging some local efforts. At Seattle Pacific University, the School of Business and Economics contains a program called The Center for Integrity in Business. Their purpose is to ask the question “is making money the real goal of business?” Introducing their program on the SPU website, The Center for Integrity in

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Business says, “To make money the primary goal and/or measurement of success is to lose sight of the broader role business plays in society. To focus exclusively upon the pursuit of narrow self-interest is to become victim to the tyranny of the financial markets. Investors of all type and level make decisions almost exclusively on the basis of financial returns. When that becomes the driving and over-riding metric, it should come as no surprise when fund managers, business executives and/or their auditors find ways to achieve high returns, even if it requires "creative" financing, reporting and/or analysis.... We feel there is a vital role and compelling purpose for business rooted in a biblical worldview. Business is more than a profit-generating mechanism. It has an important - and even redemptive - role to play in society. There is nothing wrong with earning a fair return on one's investment or products, but that is a byproduct of providing valuable goods and/or services. We are firmly committed to the understanding of business as service and see a career in business as a noble vocation.” If that sounds important to you, write to the folks at Seattle Pacific and let them know; send a donation with your note if you can. Or if you find it easier to worry about fairness for farm workers than about the very philosophy of business in America, then I encourage you to buy as much of your food locally-grown as you possibly can. Lee Campbell can tell you all about the Farmers’ Markets in our area. And if you can’t live without your tomatoes on sandwiches and in salads in the winter months, then consider patronizing Whole Food Market, the only supermarket chain in the U.S. as of February which has signed on to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) Campaign for Fair Food, which means that it has promised not to deal with growers who tolerate serious worker abuses and, when buying tomatoes, to pay a price that supports a living wage.

In combating the systemic, culture-wide sin of selfishness that mirrors David’s sin, we can also take Nathan as our role-model. Consider the courage of Nathan. To confront David with his sin was a very dangerous thing, indeed. David had already had a valued member of his army slain to cover up what he had done. We know from earlier stories that David trusted Nathan as a prophet and a counselor but previous service was obviously no guarantee that David would not have him put out of the way. Nevertheless, Nathan persisted. The primary curriculum writer for the United Methodist Church General Board of Discipleship, Rev. Safiyah Fosua points out that Nathan is very like modern-day whistle-blowers, who risk their careers and even their lives to the cause of the truth. When I think of whistle-blowers, I always think of Michael Mann’s movie “The Insider,” which was partially filmed in Louisville while we lived there. Jeffrey Wigand lost his career, home and family in exposing the chicanery of Big Tobacco. Fosua cites the examples of Hugh Thompson, who risked his life by landing his helicopter in the middle of the Vietnamese village of My Lai to rescue civilians during the infamous massacre by his fellow U.S. Army troops, and of the Iranian citizens who continued to provide the world with photos and video of the violence that followed the recent elections, in spite of the danger to themselves. Are we as fearless to stand up and speak out when the selfishness of some takes a toll on the wellbeing of others? Would we risk, perhaps, even ostracism from a group to stand against gossip or bullying? Would we march or picket for the cause of the rights of others?

As I studied this passage from Second Samuel this week and read the commentaries and articles and sermons that I found associated with it, I was troubled by the idea that the communal sin of our society is so closely addressed by Nathan’s parable. Reflecting further on that parable, I was struck and my conscience goaded by Nathan’s courage. I hope that I have adequately communicated those thoughts and feelings and that you have come to share them with me to

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some extent. But what has always gripped me about this story from the time I first became aware of it is how much I have in common with David and his sin. I'm not talking about the facts in the matter, of course. There is nothing in my personal narrative which matches David's acts of forced mating, murder and marriage. But David's attitude, the feeling of "I am entitled to what I want simply because I want it regardless of the needs of others," that I understand all too well. I understand the both the temptation and the reality of setting aside the good of others to seek my own desires and, like David when the message of Nathan's parable hit home with him, I have known the shuddering realization that I have sinned against the Lord. Sometimes, my confession of faith has been the same that Paul wrote to his young colleague Timothy: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost." In allowing this story of David to resonate within me, I understand the judgment of St. Augustine of Hippo, who said that human beings were *non posse non peccare*, "not able not to sin."

But the Good News is that Christ Jesus did come into the world to save sinners; that in the grace of God, I am forgiven, even though my misdeeds were as evil as adultery and murder, just like David. When I read the words of Psalm 51, which tradition tells us David wrote after his visit from Nathan, then I can claim as my own not only the confession ("Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment"), not only the plea ("Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me"), but also the thanksgiving ("O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise")! The incident with Bathsheba is not the end of David's story and my sins are not the end of mine. There were consequences for what David did – by setting such a tone in his household of sexual exploitation and violence he made it more possible for his eldest sons to choose lives of rape and rebellion. There have been and will be consequences in my own life for the selfish and broken choices I have made and will no doubt make again. But like Augustine I can also say, "even from my sins God has drawn good." That was certainly true for David as well – the child he got on Bathsheba died but they had another son whose name was Solomon, who rivaled his father as Israel's greatest and most faithful king. And from the line of Solomon, centuries later, came Jesus of Nazareth, called by some "the son of David" and "great David's greater son."

In the story of David, in his sin and in his repentance and in the knowledge that God, as Nathan said, "put his sin away," we find the reminder that "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We are reminded that our stories do not end in our failures. As the 12<sup>th</sup> Century monk, Peter of Damaskos wrote, "Should we fall, we should not despair and so estrange ourselves from the Lord's love; let us always be ready to make a new start. If you fall, rise up. If you fall again, rise up again." And so, my sisters and my brothers, let us rise up again and commit ourselves anew to the person and mission of our Redeemer, Christ Jesus our Lord, who left behind for us the symbols of bread and grape, body and blood, to remind us that in Him we are broken and that in Him we have new, abundant and everlasting life. Thanks be to God.