



This week's First Lesson from Second Samuel is a good reminder of the multitude of ways in which we can read the same text and come away from it with different perspectives and understandings. It is a passage which is multivalent; that is, it can be read in different ways resulting in different understanding about what God is trying to tell us about God and the church and about God and our own ways of being in relationship with God and each other.

David is king of Israel. The people of Israel had petitioned the prophet Samuel for a king. After all, their neighbors all had kings and Israel apparently felt left out since they had prophets and local judges but no kings. A king, the people thought, would lead them in battle and would give them standing in the broader world. A king would show that they were a people worth dealing with- not just a small group of semi-nomadic people who were different because they believed in one God, not multiple gods like their neighbors did.

The people petitioned Samuel for a king. We want to be like everyone else. We want to be respected by the world, not simply chosen by God. Especially when chosenness meant too often being called to act in ways inconsistent with the values of those around them. For examples, the people of Israel had dietary laws that set them apart from their neighbors. They had laws about how to behave: do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet. They had laws about justice: no one could be convicted unless he or she had the opportunity to hear the testimony against them. Care for the widow and the orphan. Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt and let the Lord's goodness and mercy in bringing you out of Egypt cause you to care for the stranger among you.

All of these laws- ways in which the people of Israel were different from their neighbors. Set apart. Perhaps looked at a bit askance. Probably some people thought they were just plain weird.

The people petitioned Samuel to ask the Lord to give them a king. Despite Samuel's warnings: a king will tax you a tithe of your income; a king will take census and follow what you are doing; a king will send your men to battle; a king will Fill in the blank of what challenges a king would bring. The people insisted and so David came to be king.

David, the seventh and youngest son. David, the one who was a shepherd. David, the one who slew Goliath with a slingshot and a pebble. David, the one beloved of the Lord- a man after the Lord's own heart.

Today, though, David is not the noble and beloved king. David has stayed behind in his palace even though it is the season when kings go out to battle. David has stayed behind, in comfort and safety even as the men risk their lives to defend their territory. David is not the leader the people hoped he would be. He has done all those things that the prophet Samuel warned them about.

Today, David oversees a woman bathing on her rooftop. Rather than turning away and giving the woman privacy, he watches and lusts after her. He calls for her and impregnates her.

Bathsheba has gotten a bad rap, I now think. She is even featured in a book titled Really Bad Girls of the Bible by Liz Curtis Higgs. In that book and in some traditional commentaries on this passage, Bathsheba is portrayed as a seductive temptress, angling to get King David interested in her and thus increasing Bathsheba's social standing. I have to admit that I had accepted that approach to Bathsheba until recently. Poor King David, he was snared by a conniving woman. It was not his fault.

Recently, however, another way of looking at this story presented itself. One worth considering. Maybe I had jumped to conclusions too quickly- so taking my own plea from last week that we refrain from making assumptions until all the facts are known, let's look at this passage again.

King David stays behind even though it is the normal time when a king should be leading his troops into battle. David fails a leadership test. We've probably all heard that leaders should lead – from the front and not from the rear. At least be present if nothing else.

Then David oversees Bathsheba and doesn't look away as he should. This is a culture that sets men and women apart. David violates the norms of his own culture when he fails to look away.

The text tells us that Bathsheba was bathing for ritual purity, very important in that culture. So she was doing nothing wrong at least to this point. Bathing on the roof may have been the most private place in her household. She had, as we might say today, a "reasonable expectation" of privacy.

David calls for her and she goes and they lie together. We don't know what was said to Bathsheba to get her to go to David. Some suggest, although the text is not clear, that force was used. That Bathsheba was raped. At any event, David, as king, was in a position of power over Bathsheba, both because she was a woman **and** because her husband was one of David's military leaders. It's possible that Bathsheba and David already knew each other because of the relationship between David and Uriah, Bathsheba's husband.

There is a lesson here, though, whether or not David and Bathsheba knew each other before or not. We often don't realize what power and authority we have- and sometimes power and authority is misused. Sometimes power and authority is misused because we don't realize how other people perceive us or the position we hold. Sometimes it is misused deliberately to get what the one who has the power and authority wants. That may or may not have been the case here. All we know from the text is that David sent messengers to get Bathsheba, she went, they lay together and Bathsheba became pregnant by David.

Here is another area where David fails to be the king God called him to be. David violated at least two of the Commandments: do not commit adultery and do not covet. Oh yes, David was married: to Michal, daughter of Saul.

The story keeping unraveling with more and more failures on David's part. When David learns that Bathsheba is pregnant, he calls Uriah home- hoping that Uriah will lie with Bathsheba and the paternity of her child will not be an issue. Cover-ups rarely work, though. Uriah is true to the code of the military and refrains. He will not engage in behavior that the men under his command are not able to. Uriah responds to David's question about why he did not go to Bathsheba with these words: "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.”

When that approach to dealing with the reality of Bathsheba’s pregnancy doesn’t work, David then compounds his sins when he orders Uriah to the forefront of the fighting. David instructs Joab to “set Uriah in the forefront and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.” Pretty nasty stuff when your king deliberately wants you to die. David sends Uriah to his death to assuage David’s wrongdoing. Whether he thought about it or not, Uriah was not the only one who would die when Uriah was sent to the front. The men under Uriah’s command would also die. They had done nothing wrong and yet would lose their lives because David could not face up to the wrong he had committed by impregnating Bathsheba.

David knew that what he **had** done and what he **was doing** was wrong. This man, beloved by God, kept taking wrong turns. We, too, often compound our sins by looking for ways out. Perhaps we are afraid to admit that we failed, that we didn’t live up to our responsibilities or we looked for an easy way around something we didn’t really want to do. We, like David and Bathsheba, know what the Lord requires of us. Sometimes we are just too tired to take that extra step. Sometimes we are afraid and so we don’t even try. Sometimes we let the world’s values overshadow the clear commands to love God and love neighbor.

We look hard to find ways to justify our wrongdoing most especially when we know we are doing wrong. The harder times are, I think, when we use our power and our authority in ways that are not life-giving. Each of us has power and authority simply by being who we are or what role we have in our family or our workplace. People look to us for answers. People look to us to see if believing in Christ as the Son of God really makes a difference in how we live.

Mahatmas Ghandi has been quoted as saying: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Keeping that in mind, we can make a difference in a world by being like Christ, in so far as we are able.

Despite the failing of David, as a man and as a king, David was still beloved of God. Despite our own failings, we, too, are beloved of God. What matters from today’s passage is that we stay alert to how we use our own power and our own authority. Use it to make lives of those around us better. Live our faith so that we are like Christ in so far as we are able. When we do wrong, acknowledge it and turn to the Lord for forgiveness.

As we go about each day and we find ourselves needing to make decisions, ask whether our choice leads to life consistent with our faith. Remember Joshua’s query to the people of Israel: who will you serve? And his response: “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

Is Bathsheba a bad girl? Is David a bad king? The answer is: yes and no. Just like us: sometimes we do things we know we should not. But that is not the end of the story for them or for us. For God loves us regardless. Yes, decisions and actions have consequences- so stay tuned for next week as David is confronted with his decisions and his actions.

9 Pentecost – Proper 12
2 Samuel 11: 1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6: 1-21

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