



Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*¹.

This week's First Lesson from Second Samuel is a passage which is multivalent. That is, it can be read in different ways resulting in different understandings

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. As author Rachel Held Evans says:

If I've learned anything from thirty-five years of doubt and belief, it's that faith is not passive intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It's a rough and tumble, no-holds-barred, all-night-long struggle... With Scripture, we've not been invited to an academic fraternity; we've been invited to a wrestling match. We've been invited to a dynamic, centuries-long conversation with God and God's people that has been unfolding since creation, one story at a time.²

The stories in the Bible are not always "pretty" or calm or peaceful. Sometimes they are pretty raw and when we get right down to it, we might be glad we're not in the story – that we're some 2-3,000 away from the events, the choices, the consequences. Today's reading from Second Samuel is one that gives us pause on many levels. To review:

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. After all, the passage starts out with: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...." Battle, violence is the norm in the spring of the year. We see this today in places like Afghanistan where fighting resumes each spring as soon as the snow clears the mountain passes.

Humans mostly want to be like everyone else. We want to be respected by the world, not simply chosen by God. Especially when your god and my God are not the same god. Especially when chosenness meant too often being called to act in ways inconsistent with the values of those around them. For example, 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. All of these laws- ways in which the people of Israel were

¹ BCP, Collect for Proper 28; 236

² Rachel Held Evans. *Inspired* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018) 28

different from their neighbors. Set apart. Perhaps looked at a bit askance. Probably some people thought they were just plain weird.

In today's reading, 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. Poor King David, he was snared by a conniving woman. It was not his fault says this line of thinking.

There is at least one other approach to consider: 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. And, by the way, David was married: to Michal, daughter of Saul.

The story keeps 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 let the world's values over

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.

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. God's forgiveness of David and of Bathsheba does not mean forgetting. It does not mean that there are not consequences to their actions. With forgiveness, though, we are given a chance to repent and to turn around and to re-order our life to once again focus upon God as the source of light and life. The darkness that we have made of our lives with poor choices can be overcome when we recognize our own failings and that our God is always waiting for us, hand out-stretched, loving us now and forever.

There is no sin so deep or dark that God is not willing to forgive if we will repent. The possibility of new life is always before us, thank the Lord. **Amen.**