

David and Bathsheba. You might think that this is a rather salacious biblical story, full of sex and violence. But this is not a soap opera. Instead, it's a rather important warning to all of us about the all too common dangers of arrogance, indulgence, and self-deception.

This story is a two-part OT lesson, both today and next week. So we'll look at just the first half this morning. 2Sam ch11

David makes a big mistake from the very beginning. It's subtle, so don't miss it. v1
“In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent (his general) Joab with his officers and all Israel with him... But David remained at Jerusalem.”

Don't miss the message. This is the time when kings go to battle. But David sends all the other men out with his general, and he stays at home. In other words, he's not doing what a king is supposed to do.

Don't forget. David was one of Israel's greatest warriors. He was brave. When he was a teenager he defeated Goliath in single combat. After that he was a general, then a mercenary, then a freedom fighter. He took great personal risks in battle.

And yet now, as king, he's decided to stay home and send others off to fight.

What's more, look at v2:

“It happened, late one afternoon (literally “at twilight”), when David rose from his couch...”

Don't miss this. The rest of the men of Israel are out fighting. David is sleeping the day away, and waking up in time to see the sun going down.

In years past, David was more concerned with the lives of his men than with his own. But now, they're off risking they're lives, and he's lying around doing nothing.

So already, David's got 2 strikes against him. And then it gets worse.

While he's on the roof, end of v2, he sees a woman bathing. David's Jerusalem was built on a slope, and the king's house was at the top of the hill. So he would have been able to see a lot of things that other people couldn't. And he sees a beautiful woman bathing.

Now, oftentimes, Bathsheba has been portrayed as some sort seductress. But the text gives no indication of this whatsoever. The text is focused on David, not her. To blame her for what happens next is to blame the victim. It's like the old rape defense, “She asked for it.”

Well, Bathsheba is not asking for it. She's bathing at her house. She's doing it at twilight so she wouldn't be as visible. It could be on her roof, but it could very well have been in her own courtyard as well. There's no indication that she's even nude--this kind of bathing was often done partially clothed. In fact, this may not even be a case of David being aroused because he sees too much. It could very easily be a case of David not seeing enough and desiring to see more.

And to top it off, the reason she’s bathing is given parenthetically in v4: “She was purifying herself after her period.” In other words, she was doing what the law of the Lord required of her. She was trying to act in obedience to God.

No, there’s no indication that Bathsheba at any point acted seductively. The text here indicates that the fault lies with David.

In fact, look at v3: David asks who she is. If she were single, he could pursue her. But he is told that she is Uriah’s wife. That should have ended things right there.

But David goes a step further. v4 He sends messengers to get her. This is not an optional romantic liaison for her. In fact the word used is that his messengers “besiege her.” While David sends some of his soldiers off to besiege a city, he sends others off to besiege this woman. This is a command performance from the king backed up by military force. For all intents and purposes, this is basically a rape.

So, end of 4, we’re told, “She came to him, and he lay with her... Then she returned to her house.

It seems like that was it for David’s interest in her. She appeared to be a one night stand. He apparently didn’t think anything else of his adulterous affair until he got the message in v5, “I am pregnant.”

She’s pregnant. And her husband is off fighting a war. What’s David going to do? He engages in a coverup. He decides to bring the husband home.

So Uriah comes back to Jerusalem according to David’s orders. But he keeps refusing to go home to his wife for a conjugal visit. For Uriah, it’s a matter of honor v11: “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.”

Note the irony. David should have been out in the field with his soldiers instead of staying home relaxing. But Uriah refuses to go home because his fellow soldiers are still out in the field. Bottom line: the coverup doesn’t work.

So David goes from adultery and deception to murder. V15 He sends instructions to General Joab; instructions to put Uriah in the very front lines, literally, in the “spearhead” of the formation. Then, Joab was to pull back from Uriah in battle so that he’d be isolated and killed. And David even has the gall to send these orders to Joab via Uriah himself. And sure enough, in the next battle, David’s plan works. Uriah is killed. And when Joab sends word, David says to him:

“Do not let this matter trouble you.”

The literal meaning is even more pointed. “Do not let this matter appear evil in your eyes.”

This tells us something about how David is feeling. No remorse. No twinge of conscience. No sense of loyalty. He’s the king. He doesn’t have to follow the rules. And as for his soldiers, theirs is not to reason why. Theirs is but to do or die.

Now this is the same David who in years past had shown exceptional loyalty and devotion to his men. Several years before, David was in the midst of a campaign. One day, he made an offhand comment to his soldiers that he wished he could have a drink of the water like they had in his hometown well.

Well the soldiers went off, fought their way through enemy lines, got water from that well, and brought it back to David.

David refused to drink that cup of water. David knew that those soldiers had risked their lives to bring him that water. He knew that that water represented them putting their lives on the line for him. So he regarded it as too precious for him to drink. Instead he offered it to the Lord.

But now, one of his loyal soldier’s lives is as nothing to him. Uriah is expendable as long as his death covers up David’s crime.

David believes that there is no controlling legal authority. He’s the king. He can do what he wants. And he’s somehow rationalizing his actions. We don’t know what his actual rationalizations are. But he has convinced himself that adultery and murder in this particular case are not evil. “Don’t let this matter appear evil in your eye.”

Which goes to show the human capacity for rationalization and self-deception. David is a man who has had an intimate relationship with God. He has done heroic things over and over. And yet, he shows himself capable of grave sin.

And in David’s case, one sin leads to another. Things build and cascade and quickly get out of control. Lust and covetousness move to adultery and deception. And eventually, David ends up thinking that he has gotten away with murder.

“Don’t let this matter appear evil in your eye.”

But it’s interesting. Right at the end of ch11 we see one line. We’ll hear it next week. It’s a small line. But it’s a crucial line:

“But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.”

Literally, it says, David’s actions were “evil in the sight of the Lord.”

David has rationalized so that it is not evil in his eyes. But it is evil and disloyal in God’s eyes. But we’ll save that part of the story for next week.

In the meantime, the first half of this story about David's fall can be a good warning to all of us to be on constant guard. If David can slip up, then we can slip up as well. No one is so perfect that they can't sink into sin.

Also, the pattern of David's fall is an important reminder. Things often start with small lapses of judgment and cascade into major sins.

David puts himself in the wrong place to start, choosing to be in bed on his roof instead of with his army in the field. And he misses several opportunities to break the ever growing chain of events. And so things get worse and worse and worse. Yes, sin happens. But it doesn't just happen. In David's case, sins of omission lead to sins of commission.

The Epistle of James speaks eloquently about this pattern:

"No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"... one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death."¹

All of us will be tempted by our desires. The question is, Do we nurture those desires until they become something even more destructive? Or do we seek to push them away before they grow? After all, it's one thing to have a bird land on your head and shoo it away. It's another thing to let it build a nest there.

Let David be a warning. Be on guard. Resist temptation. And fight the good fight against evil desires, so they won't grow into worse sins.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. James P. Haney V
St. Paul's-on-the Plains Episcopal Church

¹ James 1:13-15