

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 29, 2018

II Samuel 11:1-15
Ephesians 3:14-21

Uriahgate

Sermons, according to Reinhold Neibuhr, are supposed to be written with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. But even Reinhold Neibuhr might have flinched at how closely, in recent days, the Bible resembles the daily newspaper. Today is one of those Sundays when it's hard to be sure which is which. The first reading is about a head of state who abuses power, exploits women, commits adultery, covers up his crime, and expects to get away with it.

And people say the Bible is out of touch with the real world.

When I was a seminary student, I was required to deliver children's sermons in the church I served as an intern. I had been studying the work of a Christian Educator named Virginia Thomas, so I decided to do something different. Rejecting the smarmy object lesson, I resolved to tell Bible stories to the children when it was my turn to do the children's sermon.

So, for my very first children's sermon, I told how David defeated Goliath with his one round stone and his shepherd's sling. I made the story rather dramatic, twirling my imaginary sling around my head and launching my imaginary projectile straight into Goliath's temple. Crash went the giant's armor! Thud went his body! Whoosh went the huge sword in the hands of the shepherd boy!

I suppose I got carried away. After the service, a hastily formed committee of parents met me on the church steps to demand I stop telling Bible stories and stick to object lessons. I can only imagine what they might have said had I told the children about David, Bathsheba, and the unfortunate Uriah the Hittite.

You just heard a portion of the sorry tale. While troops are out in the field, shoring up his kingdom against the Ammonites, King David is home in Jerusalem, twiddling his royal thumbs and pacing the roof of his royal residence. He looks down on a neighboring rooftop and sees a woman bathing. Lust gets the better of him. He finds out the woman's name: Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who at that very moment is fighting in David's army.

He brings Bathsheba to the palace and takes her to his bed. Like a lot of men today, he thinks he can do what he likes because he has the power, and after all, he is a man.

Or perhaps it's more complicated than that. Perhaps Bathsheba knows the king will be on the palace roof that afternoon. Perhaps David, the shepherd boy, did not grow up to be David, the dirty old man without help. Maybe a seductress caught him in a weak moment. Maybe, to use the current idiom, he had grown out of touch with his own inner needs. The narrator doesn't say. I suspect he doesn't care.

Biblical writers, on the whole, are much less concerned about motivations than they are about actions. Maybe Bathsheba was willing. So far as the narrator is concerned, that doesn't matter. David is the king, the anointed one of God. He has the power, and with the power comes accountability.

The parallels between this ancient story and modern accounts of sexual misconduct in high places are as obvious as they are uncomfortable. David can hardly claim that he did not have sexual relations with "that woman." The bun, as the Victorians used to say, "is already in the oven." Nor can David escape the consequences of his behavior by hiring a New York lawyer to sling mud at his detractors. He decides his best course is to engineer a cover-up: Operation Uriahgate. It would have worked, too, if only Bathsheba's husband hadn't turned out to be a far better man than his employer.

Who would have thought that a foreigner, a Hittite, a mercenary in David's army, would turn out to be so virtuous? David calls Uriah home from the battle front, gives him a 24-hour leave, and tells him with a knowing wink to go home to his wife. Instead Uriah sleeps in the palace, alongside the servants of his lord. The next night David gets Uriah drunk. Still Uriah refuses to go home. He will not break solidarity with his comrades in the field, even for a night.

King David has come up against a phenomenon apparently unfamiliar to him: a person of integrity. (People of integrity can still be found today, in the ranks of the military, in the schools and universities – Yes! – and even amongst clergy and politicians. The Biblical writers are realists, not cynics.)

And so, the plot thickens, or rather descends, spiraling down into a moral nosedive. David writes a letter to his commander, Joab. **“Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die”** (II Samuel 2:15). Ever the loyal servant of his king, Uriah hand-delivers his own death warrant.

The lectionary passage stops there, but we can guess what happens next. On the list of casualties in the next battle is the name of Uriah, the Hittite, husband of Bathsheba, loyal servant of King David.

And that, it seems, is the end of that. No Deep Throat in this story. No Woodward and Burstein to follow the money. No special counsel to investigate the possibility of collusion. No need for a lawyer to sling mud. Case closed. Affair ended. Bullet dodged. After the customary period of mourning, Bathsheba moves into the palace, weds David, and begins to knit booties.

And here, despite my own strong inclinations to the contrary, I will leave this story, too. On the back burner, we might say, simmering on low heat. You will agree that all the elements are in place for a showdown in the next chapter, if, that is, you agree with the Biblical narrator that David lives in the same moral universe as the rest of us.

Here’s the way the Bible sees it: Even though he is *King* David and lives in a palace, even though he has the power of life and death over his subjects, David lives in a world where morality matters, where actions have consequences, where right and wrong make a difference.

He lives, in other words, in God’s world, in God’s moral universe. No matter how powerful he is, no matter how untouchable by his enemies, no matter how free he appears in his royal domain, David is no different from you or me or anyone else. David is accountable to God; he lives in a moral universe of God’s own making.

That’s how the Bible sees it. Not everyone today shares that world view. Morality, many people assert, is a relative matter, very much dependent on one’s own cultural perspective. Indeed, in some cultures David might be considered a hero. He knows what he wants, and he gets it.

By the standards of our own culture, David is less a scoundrel than he is special type of leader, the kind who knows how to play the system. Who are *we* to fault David for his political machinations and his sexual peccadilloes? He keeps the Ammonites from committing acts of terrorism, doesn't he? He makes the trains run on time. He puts Israel first. Who are we to judge?

That, of course, may very well be the point of this whole story – or at least one of them. In a very real sense, we are not the ones to judge. But that does not mean that David is exempt from judgment. He lives with us in the same moral universe, and he is subject to the same God, the God who, though merciful and full of steadfast love, is nevertheless *God*: holy, righteous and just.

David, apart from everything else, is a fool. He's a fool to think *he is his own moral universe*. “Fools,” Psalm 14 declares, “**Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’**” Fools maintain that all morality is relative, that right and wrong are mere constructs of one's peculiar meta-narrative. Fools behave as if there were no God, and here's the great insight of the psalmist: *We're all fools*.

**The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.**

**They have all gone astray, they are all perverse;
there is none who does good, no, not one.**

We're all fools. No matter what we profess, our actions belie our creed. We profess God is truth, and yet we tell lies. We profess God is love, and yet we hate our neighbors. We profess to serve God, yet we mostly suit ourselves.

But our self-deception, like David's, can't go on forever. Our foolishness will come to an end. Judgment is around the corner for David, and for us. David will be judged by the God who made him, by the God who loves him, by the God who made and no less loved Uriah.

Will David get what he deserves? Is that what we want for him? For ourselves? For all the other fools who live with us in this moral universe under God?

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: “**Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get**” (Matt. 7:1-2).

I don't think that Jesus means God wants the world to work that way, with people always having to take the very medicine they dole out to others. I think he's saying that if we leave God out of this moral universe, we'll get the kind of world no one wants to live in – a world where we all get exactly what we deserve.

The great surprise of the gospel is not that God judges, or that we deserve to be judged, but that God takes upon God's own self the very penalty we so foolishly prescribe. It would kill us, that penalty, as it killed Jesus. It's what we deserve, but it's not what we receive.

What we receive is, in the words of Ephesians, **“the breadth and length and height and depth . . . of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”** What we receive is the fullness of God in Christ, the grace which takes upon itself the judgment we deserve. So runs the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of David.

We live in a moral universe. David tried to live otherwise. He was a fool. If God did not show mercy to fools, there would be no gospel.

Brant S. Copeland, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Tallahassee, Florida
www.oldfirstchurch.org