

It Was Evil in the Eyes of God
A Sermon on 2 Samuel 11:1-27
Proper 12
July 29, 2018

Introduction

Today we shift to stories about David that may be easier for you to identify with. To this point we have heard stories about David the warrior and David the king. They were stories about the transition of Israel from a tribe to a state. Today we begin the stories about David the man.

The focus of the stories shifts from public to personal, from power to vulnerability, from blessing to curse. The violence on the battlefield is now violence in David's personal life that spins out of control.

The author is a gifted storyteller. He is not afraid to show contradictions in David's character. David is thankful and submissive in the prayer in our first reading and in 2 Samuel 9 he is magnanimous to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, who is lame. David takes him into his house, gives him servants and lets him eat at the royal table for the rest of his life.

David also has a dark side on full display in today's story. There is good and bad in David, just as there is good and bad in each of us.

First Move: One Transgression Leads to Another

We can break today's story down into four episodes: 1) it begins with David at home instead of with the troops, 2) then adultery, 3) then the coverup, and, 4) finally, the murders. Murders is plural.

The people of Israel asked in 1 Samuel 8 for a king will "go out before us and fight our battles." David has always done that. Now, for the first time, David sends out the troops without him. He relies on agents to do his work. He delegates command to Joab while he rests at his palace in Jerusalem.

David has taken a long afternoon nap. He is pacing around the roof of the palace. He looks down and sees a woman bathing. She is beautiful.

David sends a servant to find out who the woman is. The servant tells him that she is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's top soldiers.

That does not give David pause. David sends messengers to take her and bring her to him. She came to him and he lay with her.

She was purifying herself while she was bathing. The time of purification is seven days after the end of the menstrual cycle. Bathsheba is at the most fertile time of her cycle.

David thought that power gave him control, but he has no control over Bathsheba's body and a child is conceived. David's honor is at stake. It will be obvious to everyone that Uriah could not be the father of the child. Uriah has been away fighting David's battles.

David plots a coverup to protect his honor. David sends word to Joab, his general, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sends Uriah to David. We see the verb *send* used 12 times in today's text. Prophets are sent to deliver the word of the Lord. David sends to serve his own self interest.

David is full of deceit. When Uriah arrives, David asks about the shalom of Joab, the shalom of the army and the shalom of the war. This is a ruse. David is not concerned about shalom.

He tells Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." That is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. David pretends to be gracious and offers Uriah an evening with his wife when David is really concerned about his own honor.

Uriah does not go down. He is a pious soldier. Soldiers are to remain pure during holy wars and not sleep with their wives. That is where the idea of boxers in training staying abstinent comes from. Uriah sleeps instead with the king's servants at the gate.

David hears the next morning, again by messengers [David doesn't do anything for himself in this chapter], that Uriah did not go down to his house. David asks Uriah why. Uriah says he could not think of such a thing when the ark and his troops are out in the field. Uriah is genuinely loyal and committed. The Hittite is stronger in upholding the law than the king of Israel.

David tries again. This time he gets Uriah drunk. Same result. Uriah goes to sleep with servants at the gate. David is finding out that he can't control Uriah either.

David changes his scheme. Uriah has proven he is incorruptible, so David resolves to do away with him. David's honor is more important than the integrity of one of his top soldiers. The coverup easily shifts to murder. Lies lead to violence. Boundaries are easily transgressed.

David writes Joab a letter and tells him to put Uriah in the midst of the fiercest fighting and fall back so that he will be exposed and struck down. He gives the letter to Uriah and sends him to take it to Joab. Uriah carries his own death warrant and David trusts him not to open the envelope. Uriah is done in by his own integrity.

This is murder by proxy. David turns to Joab to be his fixer, someone who always acts in the interest of the king without reservation or scruple.

Joab does the king's dirty work. He believes it would be too obvious and seem cowardly to simply withdraw the troops from Uriah. Joab sends the troops next to the wall of the city where it is easy for the enemy to pick them off. Other innocent lives are lost in a tactic that makes no military sense.

When David receives word of what Joab has done, David sends a callous response to Joab: "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes. It is the cost of war." David knows better. This is not an act of war. It is an act of malice and cunning.

The rape of an innocent woman leads to the murder of an innocent man and the death of innocent troops. We will see in coming weeks that it leads to a subsequent rape in David's household and rebellion in the family.

David was submissive to God in the prayer in 2 Samuel 7 that was our first reading. David now tries to rationalize his crime and remake moral reality. According to the NRSV translation, "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." Everett Fox's more literal translation is, "The thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of Yahweh." David cannot control the judgment of God.

Those in power often succumb to the illusion that they control their destiny and can define the morality that governs their actions. David experiences the limits of his power and control. He cannot control Bathsheba's pregnancy, Uriah's principles or God's judgment.

Second Move: Softening the Story

How the mighty have fallen! This was David's lament on the death of Saul. Now it is David who has fallen, and the fall is not in battle but in moral character.

This story strikes close to home for Israel. David is one of its heroes. There have been many attempts to soften the impact of the story.

Chronicles whitewashes it. Chronicles is one of the last books written in the Old Testament, probably in the fourth century BCE. 1 and 2 Chronicles narrates the events of 1 and 2 Samuel. Chronicles omits the story of David and Bathsheba and the story of Absalom's rebellion.

We must face the harsh realities of the story and avoid the temptation to soften them.

Bruce Birch, an Old Testament scholar, points out that the distortions of the story take three different forms.

The first is Scapegoating. Medieval Jewish commentators described Bathsheba as a seductress. She deliberately bathes where David can see her. She tempts David. David is no longer perpetrator but victim.

The story doesn't take this view. David is the moral focus of the story. David is the aggressor: he sees and he takes. The only words that Bathsheba says are, "I am pregnant." Bathsheba has no part in the coverup and the murder.

The second distortion of the story is through Rationalizing. In Hollywood movies, Uriah is portrayed as an abusive husband. This gives David a noble purpose in killing Uriah. The ancient rabbis claimed that the marriage of a Hittite man to an Israelite woman was unacceptable, and David rectified the situation.

The third distortion is by Romanticizing. It has been turned into a love story through the centuries. David and Bathsheba are among the world's great lovers, like Antony and Cleopatra and Romeo and Juliet.

Romances do not begin with taking and end with murder. This is not true to the story in 2 Samuel. There is no conversation, no romance. David sees and he takes and he satisfies his urges. It doesn't seem to matter to him that he has broken at least two commandments.

The plain truth is, David abused his power as king. He committed adultery, perhaps even rape since Bathsheba had no choice but to comply with the orders of the king. He lied during the coverup. He committed murder. In carrying out the murder by proxy, Joab sacrificed some of Israel's own troops. This is treason.

Surely David deserves to die. Yet there is no punishment in the story. We have only God's judgment: it was evil in the eyes of Yahweh.

Third Move: Facing the Harsh Reality of the Story

There is good and bad in all of us. We struggle to confront the bad part. Instead of recognizing the sin within us, we project it onto other people.

The difficulty we have in facing the harsh reality of the story testifies to the ease with which we can excuse our own sin. If we can excuse David's sin, we can excuse our own. We must honestly face our own complicity with David. To face the sin of our greatest Biblical heroes allows us to face our own impulses to use others and cover up our acts to avoid accountability. This story is especially directed to those in positions of power, leadership and influence.

Sin, according to Reformation theologians, twists the soul so much that it is unable to distinguish good from evil. We remake moral reality to justify our own actions. We actually believe we are doing good when we commit sin.

God won't stand for that. There *is* an objective morality that underlies reality. Adultery is wrong. Lying is wrong. Abuse of power is wrong. Betraying the trust of people who are loyal to you is wrong. Killing people is wrong.

God still finds a way to use people to shape events, even when they/we commit murder.

Cain was the first murderer. Surely if there was a time for deterrence, this was it. Yet God did not execute Cain. He put a mark on Cain so that no one would kill him. Cain went on to found the first city, which may or may not be a good thing, depending on your perspective.

While Moses was still living in Pharaoh's court, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. He looked around and saw no one looking, then he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. He fled to the wilderness to escape punishment from Pharaoh. Years later, God called him out of the wilderness to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. He became Israel's greatest prophet.

The apostle Paul participated in the stoning of Stephen. He persecuted Christians, which may have taken the form of physical beatings, even of death. God called him to become the apostle to the Gentiles.

God forgives us, even when we commit the worst of sins. We have a hard time with that.

I gave a talk earlier this month to a business club in Edmond. The topic of my talk was, *Why is Oklahoma So Dead Set on the Death Penalty?* I gave a PowerPoint presentation for 40 minutes to 20 members of the club. Oklahoma executes more people per capita than any other state. Texas, Virginia and Oklahoma account for half of the executions in the United States since the death penalty was reinstated by the Supreme Court in the 1970s. I talked about reasons why Oklahoma is so committed to the death penalty: frontier ethic and a harsh view of humanity.

After the talk, one of the men came up to me and said, "I think we have a problem with forgiveness. We want people to be punished. We see forgiveness as weakness."

Why is that? We have a hard time asking for forgiveness for ourselves. We have a hard time admitting our own sins. We are afraid that we will be seen as weak or as dishonorable. We are afraid that we don't deserve to be forgiven. So we bury and repress our sins. When others commit the same or even worse sins, we come down hard on them, hoping to wash away our own sins.

The story of David and Bathsheba brings us face to face with our sins. We are guilty of the same sins. It is just a matter of degree. When we are in a position of power, we see something we want and take it, if no one is looking. We lie to cover

up our sins and protect our honor. People who are more faithful than us offend us. We tell ourselves that they must really be hypocrites. We get angry or desperate and lash out at people in violence.

Conclusion

The storyteller in Samuel lifts up the sins in Israel's greatest king. He thinks we can take it.

We must take a hard look in the mirror and recognize our own sins, and the sins that are committed by the government in our name.

The sins of David are evil in the eyes of God. Our sins are evil in the eyes of God. Yet God didn't give up on David. And God won't give up on us.

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