

A sermon preached on July 25th, 2021 based upon 2Samuel 11:1-15, 26-27 entitled, "Pondering the Paradox of King David."

Have you read the Bible?

It can be a daunting book to read. People often set themselves the goal of reading it straight through and commonly somewhere in the latter part of Exodus abandon the project encountering a lot of ancient laws that seem to have no bearing on life as we know it.

Truth be told, not all parts of the Bible are equal in value.

There are, however certain passages you don't want to miss, and the story told in this morning's reading from 2Samuel is one of them.

The unknown author of 1st and 2nd Samuel is a marvelous story teller, recounting events from nearly a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. We start off hearing about Saul, the first king of Israel, but before long the central character shifts to David, who rises up to become Israel's second king from his humble roots as a shepherd boy, the best known story of his youngest years being the bravery and ingenuity he displayed in taking down the Philistine giant Goliath.

At one point David gets the unique designation of being a "man after God's own heart" – walking in the favor of the Lord to become the greatest king Israel ever had – the yard stick by which all other kings would be measured. They all come up short. David was the King from Israel's glory days.

By tradition, the authorship of the Book of Psalms – central to the worship life of Jews and Christians -- is attributed to David. When we get to the New Testament, Matthew tells us that through Joseph, Jesus was a descendant of King David, and when the crowds greet Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem, they call him the "Son of David," marking him as the long-awaited messiah who in their minds will throw off the Romans and restore Israel to the glory days of David's reign.

So you can see, David is a very prominent figure in the Bible.

With all this in mind, the story we are about to hear is simply astonishing.

If the object of the author of the books of Samuel was to produce a public relations press release for the Jewish people, this is a story he would have left out for sure. Nonetheless, the story you are about to hear has been right there for all to read in "sacred scripture" for well over two thousand years.

Our story takes place shortly after David has reached the zenith of his career. Through his leadership, the southern and northern kingdoms have been united and Israel's

enemies have been turned back on the battlefields. Two weeks ago, Steve preached on the triumphant moment when leading a great procession David danced before the Lord as the ark of the covenant – the symbol of God’s holy presence – was brought into the city of Jerusalem.

But now some time has passed. Alas, David has reached what we call “middle age”, and the days of his greatest personal glory and triumph are beginning to retreat in memory.

In the words of the philosopher Bruce Springsteen, *"Glory Days, well they'll pass you by. Glory Days, in the wink of a young girl's eye, Glory Days, Glory Days."*

Before I get to the story, allow me to recall a little parable told by Jesus that I think speaks to the challenge of midlife.

The land of rich man produces an abundant harvest. The rich man has a problem. He has more wheat than he can store in his barn. He has, in other words succeeded in the initial task of life. He has succeeded to such an extent as a farmer that he (and his family if he has one) is assured of having enough to eat for the foreseeable future.

"What should I do now?" He asks himself. A good question, one I would suggest arises from his soul within, a dim awareness that life demands of him a new focus of his energies. But instead of reflecting deeply on the question, he quickly lands on an answer. *"I will build bigger barns!"*

He imagines a life lived in luxury, free from suffering.

God, however suddenly makes an appearance in the story, declaring the man a fool, for this night he will die, and what good will all his stored away grain do him then? The story ends with a call to “store up treasure in heaven.”

Perhaps in gratitude for his good fortune, the wealthy farmer should have turned his gaze towards his neighbors who were starving – neighbors losing their land to debtors. Perhaps lending a helping hand to them is what “treasure in heaven” would have looked like.

I would suggest that in the story we are about to hear, David has reached a similar crossroads – what is commonly called a “mid-life crisis.” And David doesn’t manage it well.

Listen for the Word of the Lord as it comes to us from the eleventh chapter of the second book of Samuel.

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

Did you catch the subtle implications here? It is the Springtime, "*the time when kings go out to battle*," like David has done so many Springtimes past. But this year he stays home and lets Joab, his general run the show.

The old get-up-and-go has got up and gone. David's physical energy has waned, but it's not just that. The sense of adventure is missing. Perhaps this is related to the fact that his original mission has largely been accomplished. Israel's adversaries who would threaten their security have had their butts kicked.

David is, I would suggest, depressed. Lethargic. The old vitality just isn't there anymore. It's all David can do to get up off his elegant couch. Like the farmer whose barn is filled with grain, there is a question floating in the air: *Now what?*

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.

Perhaps you know what is about to happen. It isn't good. More often than not, the story is interpreted in such a way that at least some of the blame is placed upon the beautiful woman. She is up on her roof, in sight of the King's palace intentionally trying to seduce the king.

NO. As the narrator will shortly tell us, the woman is simply fulfilling the requirements of the Torah regarding how a woman who has been rendered ritually "unclean" by her monthly period must undergo a ritual bathing before she is permitted to be among other people once more. She is carrying out the commandments of her religion.

David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.'

Uriah is an officer in David's army, away from his home, bravely fighting at the front to defend Israel's borders.

So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house.

Notice: David holds all the power in the interaction between himself and Bathsheba. She cannot disobey the King's command to come to the palace, nor the his demand that she have sex with him. There is a compelling argument to be made that what David committed here was not only adultery, it was also rape.

Why did David commit these grave sins?

He has, I think the story suggests, lost his way. In the imagery of Jesus' parable, he has filled his barn full of grain, but building bigger barns is not really an option here.

David longs to feel once more the vitality of his younger years. There is an emptiness within he's trying to fill. He gives himself over to sexual lust, like so many other men throughout history who have lived long enough to have what is known as a "mid-life crisis."

The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'

Actions have consequences. David quickly begins conspiring to cover up the sins he has committed.

So David sent word to Joab

his general overseeing the battles on the frontlines,

'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going.

You know, he made small talk.

Then David said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house, and wash your feet.' Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, 'Uriah did not go down to his house', David said to Uriah, 'You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?' Uriah said to David, '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.'

David needs Uriah to sleep with his wife to cover up the fact that he has impregnated her. But David has a problem: Uriah has a particularly noble character. In loyalty to and solidarity with his soldiers at the front – indeed, in solidarity with God and the ark of the covenant that do not yet have a temple to dwell in – Uriah refuses to go in to his house and sleep with his wife.

Then David said to Uriah, 'Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.' So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk;

You know, get Uriah drunk and maybe he'll let go of his principles and go sleep with his wife. But this doesn't work either.

(In) the evening (Uriah) went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, 'Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.'

Unwittingly, Uriah carries the order for his own execution to Joab. In what follows, Joab carries out David's orders, and Uriah is murdered.

Skipping down to the 26th verse:

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him.

Indicating that Bathsheba did in fact love and honor her husband. Nonetheless, she felt she had no choice but to obey the king's orders.

When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

Note: David had *many* wives.

Initially, it appears that David has gotten away with the evil he has committed. Chapter eleven concludes this way, however:

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

In the following chapter, we hear how the Lord has Nathan the prophet pay David a little visit. Nathan proceeds to tell the King a story about a rich man who had all he needed and more, including a huge flock of sheep, and another poor man who only had one little lamb whom he adored like a child. When the rich man has an unexpected house guest, apparently his great abundance is not enough, he needs more – so instead of taking one of his own many sheep to serve up for supper for his dinner guest, he steals the poor man's one little beloved lamb.

David is caught up in the story. He burns with anger over the injustice. *"The man who did this deserves to die!"*

To which Nathan famously replies to David: *"You are the man."*

To David's credit, he finally owns his sin. From all indications, he sincerely repents of his sins. But there are painful consequences to his evil actions.

So, what are we to make of this story?

There are a couple of things worth briefly noting.

First: How easy it is for us to compartmentalize our lives. We come to church and a part of us gets revved up about being a servant of the Lord: to love kindness, seek justice, and walk humbly with our God.

But then there are these other parts of our lives that we manage to separate out from this desire. Perhaps certain aspects of our work life. Perhaps our relationships to our spouse, or our siblings. Somehow in these parts of our lives, cruelty, or dishonesty, seem justifiable. This capacity to compartmentalize leads to hypocrisy.

Eventually though the walls with which we compartmentalize will collapse.

Character matters. Character is defined as how a person acts when he or she thinks nobody is watching, and God is always watching.

Second: When we lose our way in life, when we fail to listen deeply to what God is whispering in our hearts about how the time has come to move in a new direction, we are more susceptible to committing serious sins. Midlife crises are a real thing.

David was entering a new stage of his life. The emptiness he was feeling meant God was calling him to redirect his attention in life. Perhaps having secured Israel from outward threats, it was time to turn his attention to how to build up the communal life of his people – for instance, to find ways to care for those most easily overlooked.

And third, and perhaps the biggest point of all is the question we are left to contemplate: *How can David be both "a man after God's own heart" and a murderer, adulterer, a rapist?*

And if grace can be extended to David – the adulterer, rapist, and murderer – is there anyone that it can't be extended to? Is there anyone we can't extend grace to?

The story leads us to conclude, I think that we "are the man (or woman.)" We are David.

We human beings are complex mysteries as it tells us from the very outset of the Bible: We are made in the image and likeness of God, and we are sinners capable of great evil.

But, we may respond, *"I've never committed adultery, rape, or murder."*

A thousand years after King David, Jesus of Nazareth, referred to by some as "Son of David" went up on a mountain to give what was known as the Sermon on the Mount. He said some very challenging things, including...

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement..

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'

The point being, if we have the capacity for rage and for lust, we have the capacity to commit murder and adultery. If we haven't committed these acts, it is simply because it has been our good fortune to have never found ourselves in a situation where the temptation to commit such acts was irresistible.

This is why Jesus taught us to pray, *"Lead us not into temptation."* We make this prayer in the recognition that we are inherently weak, though inclined to overestimate our personal capacity to resist temptation.

In the end we all stand before the judgment seat of God. In the end, it is grace alone that saves us.