"What Goes Around…"

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 21, 2018

22nd Sunday after Pentecost — Psalm 25:1-10

Rev. John Wahl — II Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27, 12:1-9

During this story-telling journey through the Old Testament, we have traced the steps – over the past several weeks – of Abraham and Joseph, then Moses and Jacob. Today, we come to David, the shepherd-boy turned king, the slayer of the giant, the poetic lyricist to whom so many of the Psalms are attributed. David is often described in scripture as a great man who led Israel at the pinnacle of their kingdom; in no small part because of his close relationship with God. But, today's story about David and Bathsheba serves, for many reasons, as a jarring aberration; not the least of which is that God is hardly present. Equally disturbing is the way that David – who had arisen to the throne from such humble beginnings – was willing to abuse his power to manipulate others for his own personal gain; and how, in this story, Bathsheba's agency and voice hardly even register. It is high time – three-thousand years later – that we hold David to account and listen how God finally appears in order to speak up for justice and righteousness: even, and especially, for Bathsheba.

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27, 12:1-9

Once again, we have skipped over a lot since Joshua's farewell speech last week. The people of Israel have established their lives in the Promised Land, but – frankly – they kind of stink at it; continually forgetting and breaking their covenant with God. After working through a series of Judges – some of them more effective than others– the people eventually ask for a king, which God eventually gives them. The first king, Saul, is replaced by a second king, David, who ably leads his people.

As our story begins, David – who should have been valiantly leading his troops in battle – instead stays back in Jerusalem and is idly walking outside the palace. Why he stayed behind, we are not sure. Maybe he didn't think his troops needed him. Maybe he had grown accustomed to the comforts of palace life. Or, maybe he was planning to satisfy his desires amid less competition since many of the men had gone off to war.

In any event, David sees Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop. This does not mean she was sitting in a bubbly jacuzzi tub, but instead completing a required ritual washing. Though she was bathing outdoors, she would have been wearing a robe.

But, no matter what she was or was not wearing, it was David's decision to watch and to act.[1]

David does not know who she is, so he sends someone to find out. He is told that she is the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, one of his best soldiers. This statement could have – and, morally speaking, should have – been the end of the story. But, instead, David sends for her to come to him. Bathsheba's voice is nowhere in these decisions or events. We are not told what she is thinking or feeling. Any suggestion that she is a temptress or welcomes David's actions is mere speculation. The action is all about what David wants and does.

There is also no indication that David is interested in Bathsheba for anything else than to satisfy his desires; thus, he sends her back home. The next interaction we hear of is that Bathsheba sends word to David that she is pregnant. At this point, our reading skips ahead, but many of you already know the sordid details. Instead of responding to Bathsheba, David orders her husband, Uriah, home from the front lines; hoping that they will do what all married couples do after a long separation, and everyone will assume that baby is his. But, David's plan fails. Though Uriah may love his wife, he also feels duty to his fellow soldiers and his king; so much so that, even at the King's urging, Uriah refuses to go home.

Since he can't make it appear that the baby is Uriah's, David decides to marry Bathsheba and give legitimacy to the pregnancy. He does this by ordering the commander of the troops to set up Uriah to be killed; using his royal power to cover up his sin. This second plan succeeds and when Bathsheba learns that her husband is dead – which is where our reading picks up the story again – she grieves for him, praying to God in lament. Bathsheba is brought to David's house and becomes his wife and their son is born.

It is important to remember that Uriah was not a Jew, but a Hittite; along with Bathsheba, they were immigrants to Israel. Uriah, the Hittite, was faithful to his oath the king of his adopted land; but David, the Jewish king, was not faithful to his people or to God.[2] In the final verse of chapter 11, God finally appears as we are told, "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." (v. 27)

What was this thing that David had done? Well, we have learned that David is not where he was supposed to be; he was watching something he was not meant to see; he acts upon impure urges; he abuses his power to hurt others; he attempts to cover up his shameful behavior; and he descends even deeper into sin by having Uriah killed and taking Bathsheba as his wife. David brings immense suffering into the lives of others, and – in the end – also upon himself. The son that is born will become

[1] Leslie Moughty, "The Power to Abuse"
[2] Dennis Sanders, "One Thing Leads to Another"

ill and die. Bathsheba is not only assaulted but loses her husband and then her son. David is humiliated by the mess he creates.[3]

And so, we might wonder, where is the good news in a story like this: where power is shown to corrupt and sinfulness has grave consequences? If there is any good news to be found, it comes in the form of Nathan, the prophet. Hearing Bathsheba and seeing what David has done, God sends Nathan to confront King David with his sin and speak truth to power. In order to do this, though, Nathan must speak to him not directly, but in the form of a parable. If he had not, who knows whether the life of the prophet would have even been spared?

But when the prophet Nathan comes to David, the message of God's displeasure is not linked to the harm done to Bathsheba. The evil for which David is being chastised is the murder of Uriah. God, says Nathan, is displeased because Uriah's life is lost. His wife's suffering seems incidental to the "real" issue of Uriah's violent end.

And yet, it is through Nathan's use of the parable that David is able to recognize that he has done evil: he has abused the power that God gave him to do wrong; he has proven that when kings forget who made them king, trouble is certain to follow. The story of the rich man and the poor man slips around David's defenses and leaves him vulnerable to the truth. It brings up in David the kind of compassion and outrage that he should have felt when he did something even worse that the rich man in the story. Understanding his sin, David is able to confess and, though it does not remove the pain and suffering – the consequences of his bad decisions and behavior – his relationship with God, who abounds with grace and is full of steadfast love, is reconciled. Forgiveness is – for David as for everyone – possible.[4] While David sinned and had to face the consequences, God did not forget Israel or its king. David and Bathsheba will have another child, named Solomon, who will succeed his father as king (we will meet him next week). As so often happens in scripture, God is able to bring some good out of a bad situation.

Over the centuries, Bathsheba has been presented in ways that have done great disservice to her as an abused woman. She has been vilified for tempting David. Movies have remade the crime of abuse into a romantic affair between two lovers. But, there is no evidence to support this: what the story describes is a one-sided abuse of power that results in rape and murder. Like so many stories that have been bravely revealed by so many victims over the past year, this is an unjustifiably ugly situation.

As a male, I know that I am far less likely to have experienced sexual assault than have others, meaning that I need to acknowledge and listen to the stories of

---

[3] John Dobbs, "David – What Happened?"

[4] Stan Mast from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

survivors. Still, I am certain of my responsibility to absolutely condemn abuse – ancient or modern. As a woman in her society, Bathsheba was powerless to call David to account for what he had done to her. But, God heard Bathsheba and saw what had been done to her. She was a child of God; and any word that speaks of divine justice is directed to all who have been abused: whether man or woman, Israelite or foreigner, in the 10th century BC or the 21st century AD.

What David had done "displeased the Lord;" as such, David's actions against Bathsheba were also crimes against God. God suffers alongside this woman who is mistreated, who has no voice, who loses everything, and has nowhere else to go. Like Nathan, we can take advantage of opportunities to speak truth to power when they arise. As the church, we can strive to end the shame placed on victims and place blame on perpetrators, where it belongs. We can teach our children about their right to give consent to what happens to their bodies, and about the need to respect the decisions of others. We can work to become a place where no one needs to be ashamed or embarrassed; and where no one has to grieve or heal alone.

Some people say, *what comes around, goes around*; but often life – and justice – are not so simple. David is indeed a complex character. His story reminds us that we are people who sin, who turn away from God and fall short of both divine and human expectations. Though it is not something we like to hear, it is impossible to comprehend the breadth and depth of God's grace unless we understand our need for it. It is equally important to remember, though, that God can and does use all sorts of people – whether powerful or powerless, guilty or innocent – for God's work in the world. By God's grace, we are not let go, even when we fall short of the mark. This does not mean that we should condone or dismiss wrongdoing, because, as the old saying goes, while God may love us *just the way we are*, God also loves us too much to leave us that way. AMEN.