



WHERE WESTMINSTER
GATHERS FOR WORSHIP

“That’s Life!”

A Sermon on 2 Samuel 11:1-15

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Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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2 Samuel 11:1-15

¹In 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. ²It 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. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” ⁴So David sent messengers to get 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. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, “I am pregnant.”

⁶So David sent word to Joab, “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then 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. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰When 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?” ¹¹Uriah 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.” ¹²Then 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, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In 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.”

"The Word of the Lord." "Thanks be to God." Really? We call it Holy Scripture. We call it "The Word of the Lord." I apologize, but what I read to you is about as unholy as scripture can get. How can we say, "Thanks be to God?" This story is missing the divine. This story is about life.

Look at it this way. We have Bathsheba and Uriah, a young military couple, living off the base. Not a lot of money, one bedroom apartment, kitchen table with a linoleum top, a book case made of milk crates. Young and in love. He is a soldier. He is dedicated to his family, his country, and his fellow soldiers. He has their backs, and they have his.

Now, talk about government intervention. This isn't a story about the government reaching into a pocket book. This is a story of the government ripping out a heart. The king, the mighty king of Judah, the uniter of the kingdoms, the one who could take down a giant with a small stone and great faith, that man of God, did the very thing that the prophet warned about when the people asked to have a king.

You remember back before there were kings and only judges. The people cried out, "We want to be like all the other nations. Give us a king!" And Samuel said, "Why do you want a king? You have your God!" "No. We want to be like all the other nations! Give us a king." And Samuel said, "A king will take your sons and send them to fight his battles. A king will take your daughters and call them his own. A king will take your life." And the people said, "Give us a king." And Samuel went away shaking his head in sad despair. And God said to Samuel, "Don't cry. They've not rejected you. They've rejected me."

The people should have listened. It seems that having a crown doesn't change a man. A title doesn't make someone a better person. We know this. The one who flies high today will crash tomorrow. I used to like Bill Cosby. I memorized his record. "Noah...how long can you tread water." I grew up with his cartoon, "Hey, Hey, Hey, it's Fat Albert." When I was having a family, the Cosby show was on TV. It breaks my heart to see him fall. People fall. Is it because of ego? Power? Is it testosterone?

The king just snatches that pretty girl up. Who cares if she's married? The king does what he wants with her. The king gets her pregnant. The king tries to cover it up. The king writes out a death sentence, "Send Uriah to the hardest fighting, and then draw back. Sincerely, David." He folds it up, licks the envelope, and hands it to Uriah. "Give this to your commanding officer." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Is this Holy scripture? Is this a passage you run to in times of trouble? No. This isn't holy. This is life. Ok. Maybe not your life. Maybe not my life. But the kind of life that got played out in a movie theater this week. The kind of life that hit a military base last week. Some depressed, mentally ill person with a gun. Is anyone surprised anymore? It's life.

When I went to Mozambique, they had, at an elementary school, a play on how HIV was spread. In an elementary school? That's life. Do you know in that country beautiful children are being raped by men who think they can get cured from HIV if they can just find a virgin? So they have to educate people about life. That's life.

I learned this week from our District Attorney that young women are being moved from Memphis to Atlanta and Atlanta to Nashville as prostitutes in order to keep the lineup fresh. It's going on right now. Someone's little girl is in a van on I-40. That's life.

We got life this morning. Nothing holy. Nothing pure. We got a king who just ruined some lives. A good soldier murdered. Can you imagine being in Uriah's troop when the generals ordered them to back away and just let their comrade be killed? "I have your back; you have mine." "Not today. We were ordered to leave you there." Do you think Uriah looked back at the moment of his death with dismay at all who betrayed him? Can you imagine the look on Uriah's face? I imagine that face might haunt you the rest of your life.

I wonder if Bathsheba was able to attend her husband's funeral. I wonder if she was allowed to go back to the apartment and fold up his clothes, put the photos in a box.

I'm sorry in this story that David is a bad, bad man. It's life. Now if we want the divine to enter in, let's go to scripture. What does God have to say about this? That's what we want to know when life gets confusing. "What does scripture say about this?" Well, what does the Holy Scripture say? It says, "Thou shall not covet." Oh, he wanted that woman. It says, "Thou shall not steal." He just took her away. It says, "Thou shall not commit adultery." It says, "Thou shall not bear false witness." The king tried to cover it up.

It says, "Thou shall not kill." That's what scripture says about King David! Well what do you do about it? Well, let's go to scripture. The book of Leviticus. "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor- both the adulterer and adulteress are to be put to death." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Justice. The scripture is crystal clear on it. Put them to death. No "ifs, ands, or buts." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! No, ifs, ands, or buts.

But once there was a man who was engaged to a woman. He loved that woman very dearly. One day he discovered that she was with child. He had had no relations with her. He was devastated. But he, being a righteous man, decided not to run to do what the law said. "Put her to death." He decided that he would divorce her quietly. But one evening that man had a dream. An angel came to him and said, "You shall take that woman to be your wife, and you shall make that child your own. "You shall call the child Emmanuel, which means God with us." The man's name was Joseph. And the reason why I tell you that story is because he was the great-great-great-great-great-great grandson of David and Bathsheba. You follow the law, and you put David and Bathsheba to death. No Joseph.

You see, out from this terrible story, this gritty story of life, comes the story of Jesus. Let me put it another way. Out of all this great profane sin, comes good news. God with us. The Bible said to kill him - no ifs, ands, or buts. Here's my point: How do you want to use scripture? Do you want to use it to cut and divide? We can. We can debate scripture all day long. We have for many years. We've used scripture against black people. We've used scripture against women. We've used scripture against gays. We can still use it that way. We can.

We can use scripture for anything. At the next wedding I attend, I can raise a ruckus at the wedding reception. "Who put shrimp on the table? Do you know God detests shell fish? Leviticus chapter..." And someone would say, "Oh, Donovan, that's the Old Testament!" You're right. Let's go to the New Testament. "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery." Jesus is said to have said that. It's there in black and white, or red, if you have that edition. Jesus says, 'You have heard it said, 'Thou shall not commit adultery.'" But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, cut it out." (*Matthew 5:28-29*)

You see? Do you see? We can use scripture like a knife. When we do, we generally don't use it on ourselves. We tend to use it on others. "What say you preacher? Can I get the go-ahead from God to put some hurt on my neighbor? Is it in there?" It's in there. Look, I'm not into that. If I have done that, if I am doing it now, or if I do it in the future, I apologize. Hurting one another with scripture is not why I entered the ministry. I have no stomach for it.

In my heart of hearts, I believe in the words that filled the skies with angel wings and settled on the ears of lowly shepherds. It said, "Do not be afraid, for we bring you tidings of good news, of great joy to all people." I'm naive enough to believe that the Word we are to be about brings "great joy" to "all" people. Not just some. Not some who have the mental ability to get it. Not some who have the moral stability to live it perfectly. Not some who have the genetic ability so that it all falls into place. Not some who are lucky to be born white, middle class, and American, but "all" people.

Here's the story. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God made all things good. All things. God doesn't make mistakes. God doesn't make mistakes. Here's the story: There was a temptation. We call it "the Fall." The temptation in the garden wasn't "Do you want to be evil?" The temptation was and still is: "Don't you want to be God? Don't you want to know good from evil? Don't you want to sit in the judgement seat?" The temptation was, and still is, to have the desire that we can be God - a divine judgment - on all things that God called good.

It is my judgment that we need to get out of the judgment business, and look to Christ. In the end, I only see Christ spreading his arms out wide and saying, "Come into my grace. Take a piece of me if you need to. Cut out some body. Take some flesh. Here's my blood. All I have for you is mercy."

I'm naive enough to believe that God can take our terrible stories - every single one of them - and with amazing grace turn our profane acts into God's Good news. If I'm wrong about that, well then....

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my

transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51)

And God does. You can ask a rapist and a murderer whom some called king. Or you can just ask yourself. We need to smile more! It's good news for “all” people.

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