

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Are We All Kings?

2 Samuel 11

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Well, David and Bathsheba. If you're going to spend several weeks with King David through Old Testaments readings, you're probably going to end up, at one point or another, in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. And if you're following along with lectionary readings, you're going to end up there in two parts over two weeks, chapter 11 and chapter 12. It's hard to go around this story, though it's one that makes us uncomfortable and uneasy. It's fairly explicit. It's fairly sordid. It's fairly dark and twisted. You might be surprised to know that I've spent the last two Sunday mornings talking with our youth group about this story. The rest of you will be glad to know how courageous they are talking about these things. We squirmed at first when we read this story, but eventually we worked through it and talked. They're a lot braver than we are sometimes. And they're pretty insightful. I learned a lot from them.

Our youth are courageous. The rest of us might be tempted to take a wide berth around this story, and not talk about sex and adultery and sexual assault, and not talk about deception and bribery and murder. To be honest that would be just fine with me. Is this even a story that needs to be told again and again?

I'd be pretty happy most of the time to talk about the happy idea of love without talking about what might constitute disordered love. To talk about the idea of marriage without talking about the violations of what God intends for marriage. To talk about the great King David, man after God's own heart, without talking about creep David, perving on women while others suffer the consequences. Can't we just talk about affirming things, nice things?

1 Chronicles in the Old Testament takes that approach. It takes the route of 'let's not talk about these things in polite company.' Would that this was in the lectionary. 1 Chronicles, chapter 20, tells about this same part of David's life in the same words, but it completely omits anything about Bathsheba or Uriah. Solomon just appears out of nowhere according to 1 Chronicles. 1 Chronicles is the book you're looking for if you're looking to not talk about hard things or messy things or convicting things. 2 Samuel, on the other hand, is the book that talks about hard and messy and convicting things, even about someone central to the story as David. In all those ways, it feels more like real life. Real life isn't a sanitized story.

The sanitized version of life and love doesn't get us anywhere close to the complex realities which surround physical intimacy, which in scriptural terms is enveloped in a theology of marriage and in real life terms, is usually intertwined with power and relationships, joy and pain, sin and grace.

In the face of all of this it's tempting to retreat to a blanket slogan like "personal freedom" or "individualism" or "Love is love" and not be judgmental or get into anybody's private lives. We

could do that I guess, though Bathsheba might have something to say about all of that. Does a shrug 'love is love' apply to this story too?

In the complex reality of life and love and intimacy—there's always a story, there's always a consequence, and there's always an ethic, a morality taking place in the story in the community in which the story takes place. Always. If you do something more than say "well, we're not going to talk about it" or "love is love" and move on from David and Bathsheba, you're practicing discernment; you're doing sexual ethics. Our youth are surprisingly wise in this. You'd be proud of them. They look at what's in front of them alongside the vision of intimacy within a marriage of love and commitment and character, and know they're discerning what we are called to and who we're called to be.

There's a false dichotomy out there that some people are judgmental about intimacy and marriage and other people aren't. But I think that's probably not true. I think we're all practicing discernment, and we're all trying to know what's good and true and beautiful.

Admittedly, it's much easier to retreat to the sanitized versions of all of these things. 1 Chronicles avoids the story. It doesn't judge David, and it writes Bathsheba out of the story. It doesn't even mention her. It acts as if this and other things like this don't happen. That's one way to sanitize life, and that's easy.

The other easy thing to do is to say that what adults do that's legal is morally good as long as its consenting. This is the approach of just about everything you ever see on tv or movies or read in books or in endless articles about dating and physical intimacy. The rich, meaningful ethics and spirituality of marriage and sexual intimacy has been reduced down to one question: does everyone involved freely agree to this, whatever *this* happens to be. If so, there's nothing more than should be said about it.

To be fair, a recognition of the importance of consent is a massive achievement because for much of history, it only mattered what one person wanted, the person with power—in the relationship, the man. This is especially true if you're a 9th century BC king.

That, of course, is where we find David and where David finds himself. He's the king, and in an ethic of consent, what he wants is all that matters. And we know what and who he wants. In this story the king is lifted high, high above the city over which the royal palace towers, high above his men, whom he has sent to do his battles while he stays at home, high above connection with this land way down below. We have a semiotic picture of someone who is removed from everything else below him as if the story subtly poses the question: is a king above everything? And everyone? Can the king do whatever the king wants when the king wants with whom the king wants?

That is an interesting 9th century BC question as Israel's national identity and royal theology adapt to having a king in a palace in Jerusalem. Remember David was the first in that position. There's no model for this yet. So maybe it was an open question: In Yahweh's nation, is the king

like God? Is the king subject to God's laws or above them? Is the king subject to God's judgment or outside of it? For students of this story and life in early Israel, these questions frame this story and the arc of the story of Israel.

But it's an interesting story about us as well, this question of whether a ruler is like God? is a ruler subject to divine laws or morality or is a ruler above those old things? Is a ruler subject to any judgment outside his or her own desires and feelings? This is important for us because in the modern way of seeing things, we are all kings now. We are all sovereign rulers of our individual moral kingdoms where no one can tell us what we should think or what we should do.

We may not have palace roofs to stroll on and armies to command, but the freedom we have in the modern era to make decisions, to enter into intimacy, to do what we want with whom we want when we want, and not be under anyone else's judgment is more like king David than any of those other people down there middling around in the streets and alleys of Jerusalem, those people making sacrifices and praying for God's protection and favor and how to get along with their neighbors. Like David, we're above all of that now, right? Above scruples, judgments, above piety about intimacy and marriage. Or are we? it's an open question now whether our personal passions and desires should be subject to anything or anyone else besides our passions and desires in any given moment. Is there right and wrong that transcends our feelings and desires?

What happened there between David and Bathsheba? To name it something other than "love is love" is to begin to exercise discernment about right and wrong. This story invites it. Was that love? What else might we call it? It sure looks like adultery. And the Bible already has a warning against adultery. David's married. Bathsheba's married, too. So, it looks like adultery from both parties, which invites discernment, maybe even judgement.

Some people have blamed Bathsheba for this. In the 1950s apparently there was at least one Bible version that labelled this story, "Bathsheba's Seduction of David." Poor David, just minding his own business. Bathsheba's not the last woman to be blamed for the actions of men.

I think in recent times we are more able to see this story as a gross abuse of power by David. The Bible has a word for rape and doesn't use it here, but this is at least sexual assault. At the very least, this is a tremendously powerful man using that power over a woman who has virtually no power. My Bible version titles this blandly "David and Bathsheba" which is technically correct, but isn't very courageous. Perhaps it should be titled "David Assaults Bathsheba." How different would we read the story if it had that heading? How much pain might we have avoided causing if we read our Bibles with honesty instead of protecting men in power?

I think the Bible here wants to be read honestly and invites us to do just that. When we do, we see that rulers—like David, like us, are not above God, nor God's law, nor God's vision for

intimacy and marriage, going back to the very beginning, back to Adam and Eve where a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. Kings, rulers of their personal kingdoms, may have freedom and power to do what they they want, but there are always consequences. There's always God's judgment.

Judgment, like consequences, comes in many forms. There is the judgment of the heart, the consequences of the suffering of others; the judgment of our sin before a righteous God; the consequences for our own lives. More than anything, there's at stake the person we are created and called to be. For David, consequence and judgment came in a note passed to him with one line, unsigned, three words: "I am pregnant." And that takes us, finally, to Uriah. The anti-David.

The spotlight in this story is on David, his taking Bathsheba, and his treacherous attempts to cover up Bathsheba's one sentence in the narrative, "I am pregnant." It's through that we meet Uriah, the husband. Uriah is called in from the battlefield to give a report to the king about how the war is going. At least that's what he's told. David goes through with the charade, and then he says, "Uriah, why don't you go down to your house for the evening. Go be with your wife." David's got this figured out, but he doesn't have Uriah figured out. Uriah doesn't.

David calls him in the next night to go to his house to be with his wife. This time he sends room service with a big bottle of champagne and a big feast. Again, Uriah doesn't go.

Uriah is married to Bathsheba in what appears to be a tender, loving marriage to a beautiful woman. So, they have love, and presumably, he has desire. But he doesn't go to her. Uriah is legally married to Bathsheba, so he is permitted to go to her. But he doesn't go. Uriah is encouraged, cajoled, pushed to go be with her by the major cultural force in his life. But he doesn't go. "I cannot go to my house while the ark of God is in a tent in Jerusalem and my men are in tents on the battlefield." Here's a man whose moral compass points due north.

Uriah practices abstinence even when even though the law says he can go, his heart says he can go, and his culture says he can go. But he doesn't. Uriah is the anti-David. Here is someone whose character transcends his passions, the law, and the culture. He knows himself bound with God and with his community. And so here is a model for us, an exemplar. Uriah, doing a good thing even when everything else around him is swirling with the wrong things. This is courage and character; it's self-sacrifice, and here's a story to tell again and again.

It got him killed. He's not the last one to be killed unjustly for the sins of others. The honor is his. The judgment is David's who will soon learn that we are all subject to the judgment of God, even the king. David's scheming justified himself but he was not justified in God's eyes, and so by the end of chapter 11, we read what he will soon hear, "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

That's a hard thing to hear, for anyone. For the king of Israel. For any of us. It's hard to hear it said of what you did or what you're doing or what you think or what you've connived. It's hard

to hear it said, “This displeases the Lord.” That’s not a message that can be delivered by just anyone. David hears it from his trusted spiritual guide. We’ll hear that part of the story next week.

For now, by this point in this story, we come face to face with a God who relates to David and to us with grace *and* judgment. God’s grace brings us home no matter how far we are lost. God’s judgment shows us the way. So even hearing hard words like David, we can confess a thanksgiving. Thanks be to God, to the One in whom full hearted grace and clear-eyed judgment are both, together expressions of perfect, holy love for all of us down here.

Lord, our God, we bend our knees in submissiveness before you again this day, remembering you are God, and we are not. We pray that the fullness of this knowledge would flow in our veins and in our spirits, that this would bring us joy and delight and humility. We confess there is a lot of David in each of us—a lot of the pride and hubris and arrogance and the desire to justify ourselves in our own eyes. But we seek truth, and that truth is what sets us free. And so, in the name of Jesus, we come before you in the light of even this kind of story, in the light of all your Spirit speaks to us as we reflect on it. And even through the counterexamples in Scripture, we remember your grace and your truth, and we open our hands to receive them both. As we prepare to come to this, your table, a table of death and life, of suffering and victory, of cross and empty tomb. We come, seeking only you. And the you we seek is a God whose grace is sufficient for all of us and for all the world. And in that and in the name of Jesus, we say thanks be to God.

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