

2 Samuel 11:1-15  
July 26, 2009

## South Plains

### Freedom, Power, and Sex

Where do you go when you've reached the top? King David is atop Israel's tribes. They wanted a king, and now they have a stable, strong and prestigious monarchy. Last week we saw David comfortable enough in Jerusalem to aspire to build a temple to the Lord. This week we see him with a power structure that allows him to send his army into battle while he is at ease in Jerusalem. He is at the zenith of his authority and influence. Israel is enjoying its golden age. Moreover, they have God's promise never to withdraw God's steadfast love. In the eyes of the world, Israel may be only a rest stop between the superpowers of Egypt and Assyria. But to the eyes of faith, her destiny is secure because she is the apple of God's eye.

Any claim to a dynasty, especially an eternal dynasty, has got to be regarded with skepticism. The New York Yankees come as close as anybody to living up to that claim. But memories of Babe Ruth and the exploits of Derek Jeter and A-Rod cannot hide the fact that even the Yankees have feet of clay. They make mistakes and get in trouble and even lose ballgames. A good king who rules happily ever after is the stuff of fairy tales. The Bible has no interest in fairy tales. Real politics in Jerusalem, Washington, Richmond or Columbia, South Carolina, are always messy and always

favor might over right. This is a story of the real world, and we are indebted to the honesty of the Holy Spirit that inspired a story that the palace public relations department would have preferred to censor.

The plot unfolds quickly. Springtime, when kings go out to battle, was a good time to attack the Ammonites. But in this case, the star of Israel's army is also the king. And this king is a superb politician. Because he is secure on his throne, he can afford to send General Joab to take care of the mopping up operations while he stays comfortably in Jerusalem. Perhaps he is bored and restless. At any rate, roaming around his rooftop one day he spots a naked woman. He makes inquiries and learns she is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Notice that Bathsheba is defined by the men on whom she depends. The whole business is described simply in three verses in which the king sees, the king sends, and the king takes.

We would like to chalk up the speed of this seduction to the patriarchal arrangements of those primitive times. It is certainly true that Bathsheba has little choice in the matter. What the king wants, he gets. The problem with that interpretation is that it assumes a different outcome in today's enlightened world. Today's woman could have said, "No," or so we think.

There is truth in that scenario. We do a better job today teaching young girls that they can say, "No," and teaching boys to respect what a girl or woman says. We

have much, much more to do. I remember a conversation with my mother-in-law about a similar public scandal. Make no mistake, my mother-in-law despised the man in the scandal and what he did. But, her conclusion was simple: "I blame the woman," she said. "She knows better." I'm afraid that overlooks the reality of these situations. This is not simply a story of lust run amuck. This is also a story of power abused. And, that is a tale that continues to this day.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. David's sin has consequences. Bathsheba speaks only once in this story. She sends word to the palace, "I am pregnant." This changes everything for the king. Paternity is one of those hard facts that still means something even after 3000 years. This pregnancy is a problem, especially for a king sworn to uphold the covenant of the Lord, a covenant that includes a commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Plan A: The king calls Uriah home from the ongoing battle with the Ammonites. If Uriah just goes to bed with his wife one time, no one needs be suspicious about this pregnancy. But, Uriah is too disciplined in the comradeship of war. He is too faithful in sublimating his personal desires to the greater good of David's military campaign. He will not sleep in his own bed while Joab and the army are camped in the field. The one little thing that the king wants, is the one thing he cannot command. This foreigner, Uriah the Hittite, does his duty while David plots the cover-up.

Plan B: Get the soldier drunk and then send him home. David, the proven warrior-king and Uriah, the loyal foot-soldier, enjoy a fun evening together. Is this a guilty attempt at friendship on the king's part? Or, a desperate personal intervention. Whatever, it fails to get the cuckolded husband past the servant's quarters. Good old Uriah is focused on making war.

Plan C: Subtlety won't work, so David resorts to sheer political chicanery. He writes out orders to his field general Joab. "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die (2 Samuel 11:15)." The order is explicit and will be delivered by the hand of Uriah as he returns dutifully to the battlefield. War is a hellacious decision to be avoided except as the last choice not only because of what we suffer, but especially because of the suffering we inflict on others.

I encourage you to read further in Second Samuel as the dirty little drama plays itself out. Plan C is successful. The army suffers losses, but the report back to the king concludes with a note about Uriah's death. David is very forgiving about the battlefield losses, "Do not let this thing trouble you," he says. These collateral damages happen in war. Not to worry. The story concludes with an epilogue from the sacred scribe, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord (v 27)."

Notice how adroitly David manages the perks of his office. His requests, at least on the surface, are all within the normal range for any Eastern potentate. His use of executive power serves the personal interests of the executive, nothing more. No harm is done to the nation... unless we count the damage to its moral fabric. In this particular nation, the moral fabric is important.

Contrast David's power in this story with the power described in our reading from Ephesians:

I pray... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit... that you may have power to comprehend... the love of Christ. (Eph 3:16-19)

One power is external, the ability to make things happen around the king, the power to order people about, the power of life and death. The other power is interior, a strength of character, a spirit-driven power that will influence other people without violence, a power that increases their freedom.

Grace in this story takes the shape of truth, hard, uncomfortable truth about human nature. If we are looking for forgiveness and understanding, we must wait awhile. Forgiveness will come, but only after the truth of David's sin has become clear with an eruption of consequences, accusation, punishment and embarrassment. Only then, after justice is transparent, will the king admit his wrong, repent and open himself to the cleansing power of forgiveness and redemption. The texture of God's love in this incident is tough love. Grace

will cauterize David's self-inflicted injury. Cleansing this kind of wound will hurt. It's painful to read this story. We may want to hurry on to a happier conclusion, or at least to the "spiritual" lessons of Psalm 51.

This lectionary reading is a "twofer," two sins in one story: adultery and murder. It's tempting to thank God we do not have kingly authority to do such things. That would be A mistake. Both sins are leveraged by power, and most of us experience some degree of power in our lives from time to time. If we clothe ourselves as a boss, or a bureaucrat, or a professional, we have power and influence to get some of the things we want. If we are merely comfortable in the middle class, we appear powerful to much of the world.

I have come to believe that much sexual misconduct has its origin in the abuse of power, just as much as physical abuse is a matter of one person asserting power over another. That's one reason such an alarmingly high percentage of women suffer either physical or sexual abuse. Despite equal opportunity laws, at this moment in history most women are not equal in power to most men. There is evidence that men also suffer physical abuse. We need to ratchet down the overall level of violence in our society.

I think we killed off chivalry too soon. We men can be proper and helpful without being condescending. Women can accept help without being helpless. Just because the role of men is changing, this does not mean

we need to give up the strength of moral character, the exercise of kindness, or the practice of modesty and restraint. David's story is a cautionary tale not only about the dangers of lust, but more importantly about the dangers of power abused and trust betrayed.

The Bible rehearses this sordid incident for several reasons. Obviously, this is one more illustration of the human weakness in the best of us. No one escapes the taint of sin. No degree of sincerity or maturity or training insures that any of us will act as we know we ought to act.

Second, David is a wonderful illustration of how power corrupts. We don't have to be kings or queens to misuse our position in society. We may tell ourselves that other people have more money, more influence, and more power than we do. But the reality is that we affluent Presbyterians need to be especially careful with the power we do have, at whatever age or station in life.

Third, the power to make things happen cannot finally compensate for human weakness and sin. A man dies in this story. We live by grace, not by our wits and not by our resources. When we forget about our responsibilities to other people, it is grace and truth that keep us grounded.

Anyone who doubts the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture should think long and hard about these chapters in the Bible. I can imagine that some Hebrew

scribe must have paused while copying Second Samuel. Surely, he must have wondered if the greater interests of Israel would be served by recording the tawdry sins of Israel's best-loved king. It looks bad for the nation and bad for the monarchy. After all, it's the monarchy that looks after the scriptures and the scribes. Nevertheless, the scribe decided to keep this story.

Success in the world is not the ultimate criterion. The real story of humanity is the providential grace of God, a grace that overcomes human weakness, forgiving our sins and rescuing us from our foolishness. It's our story.