

I

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. Between where we left off last week and where we pick up this week, much time has passed, and much has transpired.

After God's people settled into their ancestral lands, initially, they lived together as a loose confederation of independent states with mutual defense agreements, but they weren't a unified nation. They appointed judges to settle any intertribal disputes, and so we refer to this period of time in Israel's history as the time of the judges.

But after some time passed, God's people looked around and noticed that all of their neighboring nations had something they didn't have - a king. So they went to the prophet Samuel and they said, in Ryan's Revised Translation, "Appoint for us a king!"

So Samuel took their request to God, and God said to Samuel, in Ryan's paraphrase, "Tell the people that a king is a bad idea. A king will conscript their sons into the army and take their daughters for his harem. A king will tax them and take their land. Tell them that all I want is for them to be my people, and for them to trust me as God."

So Samuel related all of this to the people, and they said, "No, we want to be like all the other nations. Give us a king."

And so, reluctantly, God instructed Samuel to appoint a king over Israel. And the first king of Israel was named Saul. But Saul soon fell out of God's favor, and so God instructed Samuel to anoint a new king, a man by the name of David.

David was the youngest of his father Jesse's seven sons. He was the runt of the litter, so to speak. Most of us probably remember him best for his battle with a giant named Goliath. David was also a singer-songwriter, and the many of the psalms in the bible were either written by David or attributed to him.

David is remembered in the Hebrew Scriptures as the greatest king in the history of ancient Israel. He is credited with unifying these loosely affiliated tribes into one united nation. He brought the ark of the covenant into the city of Jerusalem and established Jerusalem as the political and religious capital of ancient Israel. Scripture describes David as a man after God's own heart, so much so that God made David a promise.

God said to David, Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

David's hometown was a village called Bethlehem, a few miles away from Jerusalem in the Judean countryside. In a few weeks, we'll be hearing more about Bethlehem and a certain Joseph, of the house and line of David, who was engaged to a young woman named Mary. But hold onto that story and we'll circle back to it in

a few weeks.

The bottom line is that David is regarded as the greatest of ancient Israel's kings, and both Luke and Matthew's gospels go to great lengths to connect Jesus to his ancestral line.

And so that background makes today's story all the more troubling.

## II

As we read these stories from the Old Testament, we connect with our ancestors in faith and we consider the ways that people have encountered God throughout history. But some of these stories, like the one before us this morning, bring up hard subjects and expose some of the broken places in our lives. Some of these stories, like the one before us this morning, contain violent and disturbing material. So my dear sisters and brothers, please be advised that the story before us today contains mentions of assault and murder. As we come to the text today, we come remembering all of those who have been victims of crimes, and all of those who have suffered tragedies. We come and bring our whole selves before God's Word as we remember that God is near to the brokenhearted, and that God calls us to be Christ's healing hands in and for the world.

So let us listen now for a Word from God.

2 Samuel 11:1-6, 14-15, 26-12:9

*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. 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. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' 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. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'*

*So David sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David.*

*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.'*

*When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.*

*But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a*

*certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'*

*Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.'*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Stories like this one, as hard and

painful as they are, convince me that the Bible is telling the truth about God, about us, and about our human condition.

In Scripture, David is celebrated as the greatest of Israel's kings. He's the king about whom it was said that he was a man after God's own heart. He's the heroic boy soldier who slayed Goliath with his slingshot. He's the savvy politician who rescued the Ark of the Covenant and brought it into Jerusalem. The prophets are clear that the Messiah, the one who will rule over Israel forever, must come from the house and line of David.

And so if I were on the committee that got to decide which stories were going to go into the final written version of the bible, and which ones were going to be left on the cutting room floor, this one would not have made the cut. It's just a terrible, terrible story about King David's many grievous sins and the lies he told to cover them up.

### III

Perhaps that's why, over the centuries that people of faith have wrestled with this story, some interpreters have tried to shift at least part of the blame on this sorry state of affairs on Bathsheba.

But the truth of the matter is that the narrative gives no voice to Bathsheba whatsoever. The text itself has nothing to say about her opinion, her state of mind, or the degree of her suffering, which in itself contributes to her dehumanization.

We can speculate about Bathsheba, but alas, the text is primarily concerned with David. And the text is clear about David's state of mind. David sinned. He failed, utterly and completely. And then he lied about it.

And that's why I think the bible is telling the truth, because the bible does not hide or excuse the king's misdeeds.

#### IV

But ultimately, the bible isn't about kings or queens or people who lived long ago in places far away. Ultimately, the bible is about God, and about you and me.

And here's some truth about you and me, my friend. Like David, you and I are loved by a God who does not look on the outside, but on the inside. You and I are loved by a God who calls us and claims us not because we're the oldest or strongest or smartest ones in the bunch, but simply because God looked at us and said, "That one is mine." You and I are loved by a God who is exceedingly, extravagantly generous with us, a God who has entrusted so much to our care and stewardship. And just like our ancestor David, you and I are capable of amazing, even heroic acts of faith. You and I are capable standing before giants and dancing with abandon before the throne of God.

And, you and I are much like our ancestor David. You and I are capable of terrible acts of sin and destruction, acts that wreak havoc not only on our own lives, but acts that also cause destruction

and pain in the lives of those around us. You and I are capable of complete mismanagement and outright abuse of the things that God has entrusted to our care. You and I are capable of inventing all kinds of stories out of whole cloth and laying elaborate schemes to try and cover up our sins.

You and I are much like our ancestor David, my friend. You and I are capable of great good, and also capable of terrible sin. And just like our ancestor David, and you and I need Nathans in our lives. You and I need a Nathan in our lives, someone who knows us well enough to know how to talk to us so we'll listen, someone who cares enough risk showing up and speaking God's word into our lives when we've made a royal mess of things and we're lying to ourselves about it.

And so let me ask you, friend, do you have a Nathan in your life, someone who is wise, someone who is mature in their faith in Christ, someone whom you can trust to tell you the truth?

If you don't have a Nathan in your life, there's your homework for today. Take at least one step toward find your Nathan, toward finding that one person whose insight and opinion you value enough to let into your inner circle, that one person who knows you well enough and loves you enough to tell you the truth about yourself, no matter how hard it may be to hear.

Everyone needs a Nathan..

I was 14 years old when I heard one

of the most powerful sermons I've ever heard. The preacher was reading from the gospel of Mark, where Jesus says, "If anyone wants to become my disciple, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

And the preacher said something I'll never forget. He said, "Discipleship in Jesus is a team sport. It's too hard to do on your own. Many have tried it, and all of them have failed. You need to be around other disciples." David needed a Nathan. And so do you, and so do I.

When Nathan spoke that convicting word into David's life, David had a number of choices available to him.

He could have cussed Nathan out. He could have said, "I'm the king of Israel, and I'll do whatever I darn well please!"

He could have tried the blame game. "It's Bathsheba's fault for taking a bath! It's Uriah's fault for not obeying my orders to go home!"

He could have just flat out lied about it and tried to use his position as king to gaslight everyone.

But David didn't do that.

Earlier this morning, we read from Psalm 51. And if you look in your bible, you'll notice that there's a little header above the psalm that says, A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.

David prayed,

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.

My friend, in our relationships with God and with each other, the three most important words we can say are not always "I love you." The three most important words in the life of faith are often "I am sorry," followed closely by "I was wrong," followed by "Please forgive me."

David's prayer in Psalm 51 is a model for you and me for how we should confess our sins to God and to each other. For there's no hemming and hawing here. There are no half-truths or non-apologies. David's prayer gets straight to the point. Have mercy on me, O God. I know my transgressions. I know what I've done. I have sinned against you. I am sorry. I was wrong.

V

But we live in culture that teaches that mercy is for the weak, and saying you're sorry is a sign of weakness. So it is vitally important for us to learn how to confess our sins. It is vitally important for

us to get our relationships right with God and with neighbor.

So how do we do that?

Well, it may seem like a small thing, but week in and week out in our worship life as Presbyterians, we have something near the start of our worship called the Prayer of Confession.

At its root, to confess something means to tell the truth. Our prayer of confession at the start of our worship is our truth-telling time. For no one is immune to sin, not King David, not Bathsheba, not Uriah, not Nathan, you, not me, not anyone. Everyone messes up, sometimes in small ways, and sometimes royally. So we tell the truth to God and one another, that we have sinned, that we are broken, that we stand in need of redeeming.

And make no mistake, we are not telling God anything that God doesn't already know. But we do this at the start of our worship because we cannot move forward in life until we get our God relationship set right. For our sakes, week in and week out, we begin our worship with the three most important words, "We are sorry," followed quickly by "We were wrong," followed by "Please forgive us."

David had a huge crash and burn. The consequences were severe and tragic and far-reaching.

But the good news of the gospel is this. Over and over again in the

Scriptures, God keeps taking our sin, our brokenness, our shame, and bends it.

Look no further than the cross. Let us not forget that the cross was meant to be a symbol of shame, terror, and death. And yet in Jesus, God took the cross and bent it into a sign of hope, peace, and new life.

God is in the business of redemption, and because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no sin of ours that is beyond God's ultimate redeeming.

Because of Jesus Christ, there is no hurt that is beyond God's ultimate healing.

Because of Jesus Christ, there is no brokenness that is beyond God's ultimate restoration.

Because of Jesus Christ, there is no death that is beyond God's resurrection.

Like our ancestor David, we have sinned. Like our ancestor David, we stand in need of redemption.

But the Apostle Paul asks this, who is in a position to condemn us?

It is only Christ. And Christ our Lord was born for us. Christ our Lord lived for us. Christ our Lord was betrayed and crucified and died for us. Christ our Lord was raised again and reigns in power for us. And even now, Christ our Lord prays for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.