

Kerry Mansir
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Christ Church Gardiner
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I don't know about you, but David's story in Second Samuel this morning makes me a little squirmy. Because, well because, it's about sex. And I grew up in the South where you weren't supposed to talk about sex, and you definitely weren't supposed to talk about sex in church. But here we have this story in our holy scriptures—one that will change the direction of David's life. It cannot be ignored.

The story begins with these words, "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."

So we know right away that something is wrong—that something has changed with David. After all, he is the famous warrior king. He is the one who first made his name in Israel by defeating the giant Goliath with a sling and rock. And he's not just a good fighter, but he's a shrewd strategist who knows how to defeat his enemies. But for the first time, he has sent out his men to fight without him while he lives the life of leisure. He lies about on his couch and takes walks on his roof, where he sees a beautiful woman bathing. He desires this woman, Bathsheba, and decides that he will have her.

After discovering that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's officers in his army, David sent messengers to get her and bring her to him where he lay with her. After this, Bathsheba conceives, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." The text does not try to hide that this is likely a forced sexual interaction—there is no mention of any consent. The parenthetical notation in the story that reads, "Now she was purifying herself after her period" is an important detail because this means that Bathsheba was not pregnant when David forced himself upon her. Therefore, when she writes to tell him that she is pregnant, the child is undeniably his.

David does not welcome this news that he has impregnated the wife of one of his officers. He used his power as king to take Bathsheba. Now to cover up that transgression, he must use his power again. He writes to General Joab to send Uriah from the front lines of the siege of Rabbah back to Jerusalem. Now Rabbah is modern day Amman in the country of Jordan. It's about 60 miles away from Jerusalem so this was not a short trip for Uriah to make.

When Uriah comes before the king at David's request, David makes small talk about the battle and then sends Uriah home to his house to wash his feet, eat and rest. But really, David is sending Uriah home to sleep with his wife so that her pregnancy can be explained, and David can cover up what he has done. But Uriah does not go home to his wife. Instead he sleeps at the door of the king with all of the other servants.

Why? Well, as he tells David the next morning, the rest of the men of Israel and Judah have spent weeks sleeping in tents, surrounding the city of Rabbah as they attempt to take that city for David. Uriah is not going to return home to rest and enjoy himself while his fellow soldiers are on the frontlines. Uriah's loyalty and his selflessness is a contrast to the disloyalty and selfishness of David.

So David tries another ploy. He invites Uriah to dinner and gets him drunk hoping that he will then go down and sleep with his wife. But Uriah's loyalty to the troops cannot be shaken, and so David sends him back to Rabbah.

Now David is really stuck. What's going to happen when Uriah returns after the battle and finds that his wife is pregnant with a child that cannot be his? King David, the shepherd king, the people's king will continue to abuse his power to save himself. He writes to Joab to tell him to put Uriah on the front line and then to draw back the other troops. David has Uriah carry the very letter ordering his death to Joab. And so Uriah is killed.

Bathsheba mourns the death of her husband. She loved him. But after her mourning, David sends for her again, brings her to the palace and makes her one of his wives. And she bears him a son. A happy ending? No, that is not possible after all the deceit and violence that David has committed.

The story continues with these words, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." An understatement to be sure. Through the prophet Nathan, God shares his displeasure and judgment with David.

God first lists all the ways that David has been blessed as if to say..."What more did you need? How could you desire what was not yours when you had so much?" And then God continues, "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... Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house...I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house..."

We'll see in readings in the coming weeks that this is, in fact, the way that David's life plays out. This hero's story becomes a tragedy. The great king's sons will fight for the throne and do terrible things. Amnon will rape a sister. Absalom will murder his brother and take David's wives. They will treat women like property and pawns in their struggles for power. Three of David's sons will die violent deaths. David will mourn them greatly.

But it's important to remember here that while in the storytelling method of the Bible, God appears to curse David—God is not the force that makes these terrible things happen to David's family. This curse from God is not what leads to the tragedy. It is simply descriptive of what happens when people abuse their power and don't treat other lives with respect. It should come as no surprise to anyone that David's sons will turn out to be power hungry, unable to control their urges, and willing to act without concern for the consequences to others. This is what they have learned from their father and king.

Remember several weeks ago when we heard the story of the people clamoring for a King despite God's warning that kings only bring violence and misery? This story of David is a great illustration of that warning. The lesson here is not that David was a bad man. But that the temptation to abuse power is too strong even for good men. And perhaps the shock of this story should not be that it's about sex, but that the writers chose to include it at all even though it reflects so poorly on David—choosing to be truth-tellers about even the great Israelite heroes and calling us to see the madness of the ways of the world, and pushing us to seek another way.

Verna Dozier, a wise and great lay leader in the Episcopal Church wrote in her book, *The Dream of God*, that the desire for a king was the second fall after the tragedy

of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Israel would suffer at the hands of their own kings for generations before then suffering at the hands of other nations' kings. And yet, when Jesus arrives on the scene during the Roman occupation of Israel, they are still clamoring for a king to save them, even though that has NEVER worked out well for them.

In our Gospel today, the people responded to Jesus feeding the 5000 by wanting to make him their king. Jesus has to run away because he fears they will try to take him by force and make him king. The people believe that a king will save them from Rome. But Jesus knows that a king would still just be a king—all the power placed in his hands would just corrupt him, as David was corrupted.

Becoming king was not the mission of Jesus, despite the later attempts of the Church to make Jesus into a king in order to justify the kings that it would prop up over the years. If the desire for kings was the second fall, the third fall according to Verna Dozier, happened during the time of Constantine when the early church allowed itself to become the Empire, rather than opposing it, as Jesus had done.

The first Christians chose the cross as their symbol, not a crown. They recognized that during the ministry of Jesus, he talked an awful lot about losing your life—surrendering, letting go, and serving others. He never talked about aligning with empires, fighting wars, or colonizing the planet which is much of what the Church has done over the past 2000 years.

Jesus said “blessed are the poor in spirit” and “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” But we turned Christianity into a religion where the agenda is getting to heaven, calling out the sins of others rather than reflecting on our own, and acquiring wealth and success and so many things as a measure of our worthiness.

If we look around us, we can see that living that way isn't working out very well for us or for our planet. Like King David, we are finding that the more we take, the more damage we must impose to hold onto it. So as Christians, we must constantly turn to the cross. It is there that we will see the paradox of Jesus' life-giving message. That it is in serving others and letting go of our own desires that we will find freedom and life. May it be so. Amen.