

**“You Are the Man”**  
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

It happened, the text says, in the spring of the year, when crocuses and lilacs bloom, maple trees bud, and kings go out to battle. This year, though, one middle-eastern king took a pass. David was getting older and battle weary. He had been sallying forth every spring for more years than he could remember, but each year the armor got heavier, his horse got taller, and the campaigns got longer. In addition, this last winter he had developed a pain in his lower back that was killing him, some bursitis in the shoulder of his fighting arm and a couple of bunions on his feet. It was time for younger men to take over. This year he would sit out the spring campaign.

The realization dawns on a person at a certain age that his or her best battles are behind, that what lies ahead will never again match what went before. There will never be another Goliath to slay. He will never again ride into the city in front of a victorious army. The young maidens of Jerusalem who used to sing songs about him will be making up songs for younger warriors.

And so on a late afternoon one day that spring when he rose from his couch and wandered around his rooftop, he may have been feeling a little old, a little nostalgic as well as bored with that unique boredom reserved for those who have made it to the top, reached all of their goals and have everything their heart desires.

This is not to diminish either Bathsheba’s beauty or David’s guilt in what happened next. It is only to say that there are times in a person’s life when vulnerability to temptation is more pronounced. And we could at least speculate that for David this was one of those times.

As he walked around the roof of his palace looking out over the city he spotted a woman bathing. After inquiring he discovered her name and who her family was and who her husband was. As it turned out, her husband was off fighting in David’s army. Seeing his opportunity, David sent for Bathsheba and, as the text says, “he lay with her.” Then she returned to her house. It is all reported very tersely. There is no dialogue, no tenderness. It is not about love. It is about lust.<sup>1</sup>

The story raises some questions that the writer is apparently not interested in. The writer is telling only David’s part in this. But what about Bathsheba? Was she, as most people assume, an innocent and unwilling victim, helpless in the hands of so powerful a man as David? That seems likely. Still, there is a possibility that she was more than that, not only willing but calculating and seductive. Later, when she becomes David’s wife we see what she is capable of when she manipulates David to favor her son over his others sons.<sup>2</sup> But we simply don’t know. Either way, David’s part in the deed is still inexcusable.

The next part of the story is the “uh-oh” part. Bathsheba discovers that she is pregnant and she sends word to David. This is the part where the Biblical phrase my mother used to repeat to my brother and me comes into play: “Be sure you’re sin will find you out.” Mine nearly always did.

And David’s sin becomes even greater. If you recall the story, David goes to great lengths to cover up his misdeed. One commentator suggests that he does this really to protect Bathsheba rather than himself.<sup>3</sup> Presumably as a monarch he had nothing to fear. Because this was before the days of both investigative reporting and DNA testing, he could deny any involvement, and who would challenge him? Bathsheba, on the other hand, would have been accused of adultery with the possibility of a stoning at worst or a ruined reputation at least. Again, it doesn’t excuse him.

Now the story becomes even more sordid. David sends for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, on the pretense of wanting to hear news from the front, thinking that Uriah will go home and sleep with Bathsheba. But Uriah, despite the fact that he is a Hittite mercenary instead of an Israelite, in an act of solidarity with his fellow soldiers, refuses to go home. David's second ploy is to get Uriah drunk. But Uriah still maintains his integrity. So finally David sends a note with Uriah back to the front lines, telling his general to put Uriah at the front of the next battle, nearly ensuring that he will be a casualty. This time the ploy works. Then David takes Bathsheba as his wife.

All of that is the background for what happens in today's reading where we learn, not surprisingly, that "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." So one day the prophet Nathan shows up at the royal palace with a story he wants to tell David. There were two men in a certain city, one rich and one 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 meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler 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."

That is the story that Nathan told to David. It was, in fact, a parable, much like the parables that Jesus told. A parable is a story designed to reveal something to the ones who hear it. And now, finally, we get to the part where I want to say something about this whole episode, because I think it is relevant to our own lives.

The point I want to make is that despite this episode in David's life, despite also his lifestyle as a middle-eastern despotic ruler and a violent warrior, David was a good man. He had a tender heart and he could see an injustice when it was presented to him. When Nathan told his story, the text says that David's response was immediate. He was enraged. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. He shall restore the lamb four fold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." And then Nathan, in one of the most powerful lines found anywhere in the Bible, says to David: "You are the man!"

The intriguing part of this story for me is David's absolute blindness. He heard Nathan's story, but he didn't make the connection until Nathan spelled it out for him.

How easy it is to justify our own actions, to rationalize, to baptize our own motives to make them sound so noble, so pure. How easily we see injustices committed by others, and how smoothly we rationalize those we ourselves are implicated in. Jesus was right when he said that we can see the tiny little speck in our neighbor's eye and completely miss the structural beam stuck in our own eye.

So Nathan tells the parable and David misses it. He doesn't see how just as the man in the story took the lamb from his neighbor, David took Bathsheba (the same word in Hebrew). He doesn't get it until Nathan spells it out: "You are the man!"

How great it is to hear sermons denouncing evils that are not our own! It provides us with an opportunity to exercise our sense of righteous indignation and to, in fact, feel righteous, for we have not committed these deeds!

Maybe that explains the perverse pleasure we may take in the downfall of prominent politicians, business people and especially religious leaders. We may be honestly disgusted, that's true. But in another way it is our opportunity to indulge in examining that mote, that speck in our neighbor's eye (even though in many cases it is much larger than a speck). And when we are doing that, when we are focused on someone else's downfall, it is that much easier to ignore and deny our own deficiencies.

All those who have lusted after another can say to themselves, "well, at least I didn't do what Bill Clinton did, or Mark Sanford or Elliot Spitzer, or for that matter, King David." Thus those high profile people who crash and burn, who self-destruct, do us a real favor.

But Jesus put it pretty plainly when he said that it's not only committing the act, it is also what is in your heart that counts.

So we come to church and we listen to the readings from the Bible and we listen to sermons and we hear Jesus' parables and it's possible to do all that and then to walk out the door of the church never having really gotten it, just as David didn't get it, until Nathan said: "You are the man!" You are the man in the story. The story is about you.

What the Sunday morning worship experience provides for us is an opportunity to examine the beam in our own eye. It provides us with an opportunity for self examination.

I don't think we have really heard the Gospel until we feel that impact, until we feel that the word that has been spoken has found its target, and it is me!

Like the woman who shook her pastor's hand and said what a wonderful sermon it was and how it was too bad that her husband hadn't been there to hear it because he could have really benefited from it.

It's not about guilt. It's about recognition and responsibility.

To David's great credit, when Nathan finished his parable and implicated David, he did not do what he could have done, which would be to get rid of Nathan. Instead he admitted his wrongdoing and sought forgiveness. "I have sinned against the Lord."

So too, when the word reaches us in our inner being it is, I believe, always for our benefit. It is always about restoration and wholeness and an opportunity to grow and become a better person.

<sup>1</sup> *Interpretation*, Walter Brueggemann, p. 273

<sup>2</sup> *Texts for Preaching*, Year B, p. 449

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 440.