

Nathan Confronts David:

Sally Cerny's August 5, 2012 talk to Beaverkill Valley Church

We've been talking a lot about David and his relationship with God this summer, and today's Old Testament reading, 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13, again brings to life this on-going and sometimes difficult relationship. I am still chuckling over Mary's comment a few weeks ago that "David is complex"—he certainly is! Unfortunately, I missed Ellen Singer's talk on David and Bathsheba last Sunday, and I especially regret having done so, since today's reading is based upon that story. If I am repetitive, I apologize, but my hope is that my thoughts will build on what Ellen has created. Basically, in today's reading, we see that God remains faithful to and involved with David *in spite of* David's breaking God's commandments. As our reading says, "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord," and God, through Nathan, confronts the issue.

I don't know about you, but I can still remember coloring my Sunday school lesson of David's slaying Goliath with his slingshot. It was one of our favorite stories, and we were taught that David was the chosen one because he was good. He was not only *God's servant who slays Goliath*, but also *the hope of Israel, the king, the anointed one, God's chosen leader, the singer of psalms*, the foundation of the House of David and the direct ancestor of Jesus Christ. We were taught that it was important that Jesus was from the House of David . . . *God's own family*, it seemed! I even remember thinking, the first time I heard the story of David and Bathsheba as a kid, that this must be some *other* David. You know, the rejected one, the one the family didn't like to talk about. *No! It's the same David*—although, interestingly, the other canonical account of David's reign, *Chronicles*, conveniently leaves out the story of David and Bathsheba altogether.

What I didn't understand as a child was that, although David has great strengths, he also has big weaknesses and these grew as his power grew. David's abduction of Bathsheba reminds us that "*Power corrupts.*" Biblical scholars conclude that the story was probably true, because it was told in such rich, first-hand detail. David certainly wasn't the first politician who took advantage of his power "because he could" --and we've all seen that he wasn't the last. The logic goes, "I make the laws; they don't apply to me."

Here, however, God steps in, the more so because David broke *God's laws*. Yet to me the final message of today's reading is positive. Thanks to God's steadfast, enduring love and Nathan's intercession, David is *not* forever lost, killed, or cast out. The laws and God's judgment indeed *do* apply to him, but tempered by God's caring—and David accepts them.

Pop culture often portrays the story of David and Bathsheba as a love story or as an example of how women corrupt men . . . it's all Bathsheba's fault. Today's text makes clear that love and temptation are not *God's issues*, and there are *no excuses* for David's transgressions. "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord." To be specific, in his actions, David, by taking Bathsheba and then having Uriah killed, has committed progressively more serious sins, and he has broken *four* of God's own Ten Commandments. He has (1) *coveted his neighbor's*

wife (Bathsheba), (2) put his thoughts to action and *committed adultery*, (3) *murdered* her husband, Uriah the Hittite (or, maybe worse, ordered his murder so that he, David, would selfishly escape blame even while Uriah was serving as David's selfless soldier), and (4) *stolen*, taken Bathsheba to become his. David turned further and further from God as he repeatedly tried to cover up his sins—a cover-up of almost modern convolutions. As long as he was trying to show that he *didn't* do it, he was in trouble.

Today's reading, however, isn't just condemnation. It is a message of *ongoing forgiveness*, a turnaround, and a *restored relationship*—beyond God's punishment as put forth by Nathan. God speaks through Nathan, and, importantly, David is open to and accepts Nathan's wisdom. We feel that *David listens. He no longer tries to cover up his sins or make excuses, and he accepts responsibility for his actions.*

Let's go over what happens. With Nathan's story of the rich man's killing his poor neighbor's only and beloved ewe instead of one from his own herd. Nathan addresses not only David the King abusing his power but also, and significantly, David the Judge. (As you know, the King was also the chief judge.) David, of course, can't resist Nathan's tale, and when he hears it, he quickly jumps in. Verse 12:5 reads: "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; (12:6) he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'" *Ahhhh!* Here David thinks about the other man, but in his own case, his lust blocked any consideration of Uriah. So David is caught when Nathan cries out, "YOU are the man!" Then, through Nathan, God reviews his steadfast love for David and how often and fully he has blessed him—and sighs that he is even willing to do much more! But what thanks does David give the Lord? The passage 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, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites." The remainder of the passage details David's sins—and says that God *will* hold him accountable for them, and will punish him and his family. Still, if you think about it, God's judgment is kinder to David than David's was for Nathan's parable. David may *deserve* death, what David said about the man in Nathan's story, but God, like a loving father, remains true to his pledge not to desert David. David will live, his kingdom will flourish, and God's love and support for David will endure. If we return to God and confess our own faults, won't God be equally true to us?

The turning point in the reading comes, I think, when David realizes and acknowledges his evil. David says to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Here we feel David return to God and, in his doing so, the relationship between the two—and, I think, between God and His people—moves forward. It's not the *same* relationship; it is richer, more complex. God is the good Father who manages to say, "I love you and I will always love you, but you must be responsible for your actions. You have broken my commandments, and you need to face and be responsible for what you have done."

I think it is important that, in today's reading, God gives David the freedom to choose or judge between Good and Evil, and the good news is that, in the end, David, and through him

Israel and Judah, again accepts God and His commandments. We all will fall from time to time (an interesting metaphor if you've been watching the Olympics this week). But if we listen and are open to God's grace, we will be able to get up and move on to a place we haven't even dreamed of—and this too is the Story of David.

Much of the rest of 2nd Samuel discusses David's punishments and how they play out in his family—and with a family like David's and a son like Absalom, you don't need outside enemies to give you heartaches. That's a story for another day, but I do want to mention one final interesting twist to David's continuing relationship with Bathsheba. As you know, David had wives and children before her, and God decreed that their "love child," conceived while Bathsheba was still married to Uriah the Hittite, is to die as part of David's punishment. After the child dies, however, 2nd Samuel says that David goes to comfort Bathsheba, and it was from that encounter that their second son, Solomon, was born. Think about Solomon as God's promise for the future, David's chosen successor, he who builds the temple for the Ark of the Covenant, and who brings, in this case, good from evil and forgiveness beyond sin. Incidentally, if you want to read ahead to see how Solomon, who is David's younger son, became king, you will find that Bathsheba, who was given basically no dialogue beyond "I am with child" in the current story, will be very vocal in advocating for the kingship of their son, Solomon. Truly, "the Lord works in mysterious ways"—but his caring endures.