

Beaverkill Church Message
July 29, 2012

The message or sermon offered in weekly Jewish services is generally connected to the weekly reading from the Torah, or Five Books of Moses. So while I had free range to speak on any topic this morning, I was inclined to anchor my remarks with at least one of the chosen readings from today's lectionary. I looked at the list of four readings sent to me by Mary Hall – two from the Old Testament or Jewish Bible and two from the New Testament or Christian bible. It was easy to narrow the choice down to the first two selections, as I knew I was not qualified to speak on readings from the Christian Bible.

So I pulled out my bible and read II Samuel 11:1-14. As I did, I was nearly horrified to see that it contains, in my estimation, one of the most difficult passages in the bible. So I decided to let my fingers do the walking or in this case, the running, through the pages of my bible to read Psalm 14, in the hopes that it would offer me an alternative. But upon reading it my panic began to increase. This psalm did not instantly speak to me and I was left wondering what I should do. After reflection, I took a step back and recognized that I had to take this situation as a challenge. I have often maintained that difficult biblical passages are not to be ignored or skipped over. My discomfort with such passages is an indicator that I need to try harder to grasp the text and to mine it for a message or messages that I find meaningful.

So let's begin with a quick review of the complete story, which goes beyond the fourteen verses officially assigned for today's reading. Let's place this review in a framework of a portrait of David.

The passage begins by telling us that it was "the turn of the year, the season when kings go out [to battle]." David, as is his royal prerogative, remains in Jerusalem, while he sends his army out to war with neighboring tribes. From the rooftop of his palace, David eyes a beautiful woman. He thinks nothing of inquiring about her. He

learns that her name is Bathsheba and that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, a member of David's fighting forces. Undeterred by her marital status, David proceeds to have Bathsheba brought to him and they are intimate.

Upon returning home, Bathsheba realizes she is pregnant and sends word to David. When David learns of the pregnancy, he calls for Uriah to return home from the military front. During the several days of Uriah's "leave" David tries on four different occasions to persuade him to go home and be with his wife. Is David striving to protect Bathsheba's honor? To cover up the adulterous union? To make a potential problem for him disappear?

Whatever his motivation, David sees that none of his efforts to get the very loyal Uriah to leave his fellow troops have succeeded. David concludes that he must take more direct action. So he orders his commander, Joab, to place Uriah in the most forward position on the battlefield, where he is assured to be killed.

At the conclusion of Bathsheba's mourning period for her husband, David sends for her "[brings] her into his palace; [and] she becomes his wife and she bears him a son." Is this David acting out of compassion or maybe even a gesture of love?

Scripture goes on to tell us that "the Divine was displeased with what David had done," a message shared with David by the prophet Nathan. Nathan delivers his rebuke to David in the form of a parable. When David is outraged by the description of the behavior of the rich and powerful man in the tale, Nathan points out that the character's behavior mirrors David's unjust treatment of Uriah. David unflinchingly accepts this accusation and immediately states to Nathan, "I stand guilty before God." To which Nathan replies, "The Divine has remitted your sin; you shall not die. ...[but] the child about to be born to you shall die." David hears this punishment and does not even plea for mercy.

Looking at this portrait of a complex human being, I feel compelled to step back from my initial blanket condemnation. I still am not comfortable with these passages but am ready to sit with my discomfort and to accept that everything doesn't get tied up in a neat package. When we conclude these passages we have these stark realities placed before us:

Uriah – Bathsheba's husband and David's faithful warrior is dead.

An innocent child has been robbed of his life because of the sins of his father.

A mother is forced to mourn the loss of her new born son not long after mourning for her husband.

A people's sovereign has deeply disappointed them.

Out of all of this what lessons might we draw? Despite the challenges of these verses, I believe that we can view them through a lens of forgiveness and hope. When God speaks to David through Nathan the focus is on God's description of the ultimate transgression. God makes it very clear that David's great wrong was that he spurned God when he took the wife of Uriah and made her his wife. God not only teaches David, but also us, that when we act in ways that fail to honor the sacred in each other, we are ultimately dishonoring the Divine. And we don't have to behave as poorly as David to fit in this category. When we fail to look each other in the eye, when we dismiss service people simply because of their jobs, when we close our ears to our parents, children, spouses or friends, we are denying others sanctity and our own. David is not let off the hook but nor is he denied forgiveness, a fact in which we might well find comfort.

And hope, where do I find it? Without dismissing the tragic death of the infant son, it is important to note that David and Bathsheba are granted the blessing of another child. This child is Solomon one of the great leaders of the bible whose dedication to building a central place of worship acted as a counterbalance to David's behavior. Solomon sought to infuse the ancient world with a sense of the Divine and to give

the people a place where they could express their gratitude, their praise and their desire for forgiveness.

In conclusion I offer these words...

May we all enjoy the blessing of Sabbath rest

May we find opportunities to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us and especially to forgive ourselves when we have not lived up to the standards to which we aspire.

May we all maintain our ability to grasp hope in the face of adversity, challenges and disappointments.

AMEN