

We've been listening to the story of David for almost two months now. We've met him as the youngest son in a family of shepherds. We've seen him anointed by Samuel, destined to be the once and future king of Israel.

We watched him slay the giant Goliath, and single-handedly win a war for his country. David has cried over the death of Saul, the king who both loved and hated him, and he's cried over his friend Jonathan, whom he loved with a love that was wonderful, passing the love of women. Following the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan, we listened as first Judah and then all the tribes of Israel proclaimed David as King.

And last week, we sensed, with David, that he was at the height of his power. Now secure on his throne in Jerusalem, David was prepared to build God a house. Wait just a minute, God tells David, through the prophet Nathan. Have I asked you to build me house? Instead, God says, *I* will build *you* a house. God goes on to say: After you die and are buried, I will raise up your child after you, and I will establish his kingdom. I will establish his throne forever. David is not only at the pinnacle of his power over a united kingdom. He is also assured, one last time, of his place "as a man after God's own heart." It doesn't get much better than this. Yes sire – it is *good* to be the King.

If the last few weeks were indications of the good life that David was enjoying as King, this week the motto might be *how low can you go*

The Collect for Purity seems tailor-made for today's episode in the saga of David and poor old Uriah. Uriah – whose heart was so open that he didn't see it coming. And David – whose desires and secrets became all too public in the months and years to come. Bathsheba? – Well, like all too many of the women who appear in the Biblical narrative, she's almost a bit player. She is referred to by her name only one time in this story. Otherwise, she is simply 'the woman' or 'the wife of Uriah.' Walter Brueggemann names this story "the pivotal turning point in the narrative plot of the books of Samuel... [D]elicate, subtle art, ...this text ... has the power to address us." "If we face this text at all," Brueggemann says, "we are soon invited behind all the critical, scholarly questions to face the harder questions of human desire and human power- desire with all its delight, power with all its potential for death."<sup>i</sup>

Let's take up Walter's challenge, and face this text today. Let there be no doubt, it is desire and power that this story is about. The NRSV translation of the Hebrew Bible that we read this morning, read *So David sent messengers to get her*. That's really putting much to neat a spin on what the Hebrew says.

In Hebrew, it reads that David *took* her. The same word that is used to describe a military action, when an enemy city is taken. David sent – David took – David laid with her. All verbs of action – based on his desire and on his power.

Bathsheba, on the other hand, also has three verbs of action attributed to her. She came to the palace, she returned to her home, and she conceived

This is not a romantic love story as it is so often portrayed by Hollywood. The typical Hollywood treatment is to present a picture of Bathsheba as a seductress. If you've only seen Gregory Peck or Richard Geer as David, or if you remember Susan Hayward as Bathsheba – you've got the wrong image.

This is not a story for a movie on the Hallmark Channel. It's more of a plot for the Lifetime Channel – with all the lust, betrayal, treachery and death that usually accompanies those movies. This is no love story. We've heard how David went to extraordinary lengths to set the stage for Uriah to be known as the father of Bathsheba's child. The last thing that David wanted was another wife, and another child to claim the throne. Having just been promised by God that his child would establish a throne that would last forever, David begets a child thru rape.

And somehow, he's got to fix it. And so the story goes from bad to worse.

Recalling Uriah from the battlefield, David engages in a conversation that is full of deceit and doubletalk. After asking about his general Joab and getting an update on the army, David encouraged Uriah to go down to his house and wash his feet. That's a strange turn of phrase – go down and wash your feet. Often when the authors of the Hebrew Bible wanted to write about the act of sexual intimacy, or sexual organs, they would make reference to feet. Don't ask me why – we just know that this was the 'code word' they used.

David was encouraging Uriah to go home and to be sexually intimate with Bathsheba. Sadly for David, Uriah was both loyal and pious. The Ark of the Covenant was "in the field" of battle, Joab and the army were sleeping in tents. There was no way that Uriah was going to 'take it easy' by going home and having sex with his wife. The next day, when David found that out the his trick didn't work, his next ploy was to keep Uriah in Jerusalem for another night, get him drunk, and then send him home. That didn't work either. So how low can David go?

Writing a death sentence, David gives the letter to simple, open, trusting Uriah, and sends him back to battle, and back to his death.

It makes you wonder why the compilers of the Hebrew Bible retained this story. It paints David in the most unflattering light possible. I think that these stories were retained in Scripture because they are always new, and they always have a lesson for each generation. It's too easy if we draw an analogy to presidents, or corporate leaders, or even bishops and priests, and say: "Well – they sure messed up! There goes the story of David, Uriah and Bathsheba all over again." We don't have these stories in the Bible just so that we can point to them when someone rich or powerful falls from grace. We have these stories in the Bible because in them, there is a story for us.

It isn't only ancient Hebrew Kings or presidents that can let their desire overrule their hearts and their minds. We all are at risk. We are all at risk of allowing a desire or material wealth, or prestige to take over our lives. We all can be at risk of slipping into the delusion that alcohol or drugs can provide an escape from the pressures of our lives. It isn't only sexual desire that can get out of control.

And it isn't only corporate leaders that can abuse the power of their positions. *We all* are at risk of abusing the power we have in our relationships. Within our families, at work in the church. These hard and brutal stories in the narrative stories of the Hebrew people were kept in the Bible to remind us that they can also be the stories of our lives.

Remember what was said a few weeks ago – God is always faithful. God promised David that the throne of his child would last forever. As Christians, we believe that we know that child in the person of Jesus Christ. We believe that God came to earth, in order to show us that there is another way to be a king.

A king whose only desire is to love us. A king whose power is used only to help us find ways to love one another. A king who invites us to feast at his table. Not in order to trick, deceive or abuse us. Not like David did to Uriah. A king who rather invites us to join in the same banquet that is enjoyed by the angels, the archangels, and all the company of heaven. Come to *this* table, we believe is the invitation of God. Where the supply of the bread of heaven is never exhausted - where the cup of salvation is full for everyone who desires a drink.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *First and Second Samuel* [Interpretation Commentaries] (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 272. I found this quote on the web, in an article by William Wilimon.