



“Motive and Opportunity”

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Hayward, California***

Sunday, July 26, 2009

2 Sam. 7:1–14a (NRSV)

Sermon

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What’s on your summer reading list? Perhaps a Michelin travel guide, a new biography, a slice of history, or maybe something a little lighter—a mystery, a fantasy, or a romance novel?

Regardless of what’s in your beach bag or tucked in your carry-on luggage, I’m here to tell you that none of the authors you are reading has anything on the guy who wrote II Samuel. Move over Danielle Steele! Or to quote one of my favorite theologians, Eleanor Norberg, “You couldn’t make this stuff up!”

In case you drifted during the scripture reading, thinking that the Bible or ancient history were boring, I’ll recap today’s story and set it in its larger context, so that you may better understand that if it were part of a Danielle Steele novel, these pages would have been dog-eared by the time you got your turn to borrow this book from the local library.

II

Today’s reading is part of what biblical scholars call the “Throne Succession Narrative,” or the “Court History of David.” The writer had two purposes: one was to deal with the question of David’s succession, and the other was to chronicle his life. Today’s passage marks a pivotal turning point in the story of David’s life and leadership.

David had, thus far in his reign, presented himself as an ideal ruler. He had said his prayers, sought the Lord’s guidance, successfully led his men in battle, united the nation of Israel, and protected Israel from its enemies. In short, David was a ruler worthy of the throne, the admiration of his subjects, and his posterity.

The plot thickens, however, as we discover in today’s reading that David, like the rest of us, had feet of clay. His particular failing happened to have been adultery. Things kind of unraveled from there for David.

III

Before we dive deeper into the history and psychology of David, I think it's worth reflecting on how adultery is viewed in our culture and in other cultures, both modern and ancient. I also think it's interesting and important to note how social and political status influences those who—for whatever reasons—end up in adulterous relationships.

A couple of best-selling books that address the topic of extramarital affairs, and the like, note the ironies inherent in modern American culture. On the one hand, we claim to value monogamy, but on the other hand, a surprising percentage of people report having had affairs or being in affairs. The lowest statistic I found indicated that 20% of married persons studied reported having had at least one affair while in a supposedly “monogamous” relationship. So the gap between what is deemed as “ideal” in our culture and what is “real” in primary relationships is pretty big.

What motivates so many to have affairs when most people in our culture claim to place such a high value on monogamy? My professional opinion is that the answer to that question is too complicated to address in a sermon. The reasons people end up having affairs are complex and involve such phenomena as follows: cultural context, religious values, family of origin issues, physical and emotional health, communication patterns, conflict management styles, the role of drugs and alcohol in a family system, and more.

According to best-selling authors, the gap between the value of serial monogamy and the reality of it (or lack thereof) is getting larger. The increase in affairs seems in part related to an increase in opportunity and the anonymity afforded by the Internet.¹

I guess we could blame the Internet for lots of things, but of course, computers don't have affairs. People do. So, then, we're back to dealing with the real impetus behind affairs which seems to be motive, rather than opportunity.

The increase in technology certainly increases the opportunity for affairs. So does power and wealth. Many cultures, for example, find it normative for rich and powerful men to take mistresses. When the news of President Clinton's indiscretions made international news, my beloved Stephanie was in Indonesia. I remember asking her what the Javanese thought of President Clinton and the impeachment trials.

She opined, based on anecdotal observations, that the Javanese weren't surprised about the President's mistresses. They were just surprised that we Americans seemed surprised, and that anyone other than Mrs. Clinton took issue with the behavior. In the view of the Javanese whom Stephanie encountered, it was a foregone conclusion that rich and powerful men have mistresses.

Now, my point with this illustration isn't to make generalizations about Javanese mores or to comment on adultery just yet, but instead to point out that historically, politically,

¹ Frank Pitman, *Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy*. NYC: W.W. Norton, 1989. Emily Brown, *Patterns of Infidelity and Their Treatment*, 2nd ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Taylor & Francis, 2001.

and cross-culturally, adultery—particularly among the rich—was and is a generally accepted (though not necessarily approved of) behavior, and that people with power and influence had both the motive and the opportunity to enter into such relationships. So in this regard, David was no different than your garden-variety king in the Ancient Near East, or in the modern world. He had both motive and what you might call “king-size” opportunity for such liaisons.

IV

While one of his soldiers, Uriah, was on the battlefield risking his life for the king and his nation, David contemplated and executed his sexual conquest of Bathsheba (Uriah’s wife) in the safety of his palace.

David rose from his couch, walked across the roof of the palace, and eyed a woman bathing next door. David inquired about the identity of the woman, and learned that her name was Bathsheba, the daughter of Liam, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was a soldier in his army.

In those days, a woman’s identity was determined in relation to the men in her family. She was somebody’s daughter, and then somebody’s husband. She was not her own person. She did not own property or make major decisions. She was the property of her father, until she became the property of her husband. And she, like the rest of Israel, was also a subject under the reign of King David.

We often say in our time, “It takes two to tango,” and it does. But in biblical times and in royal courts, it generally only takes one—one very powerful individual, usually a man, to initiate an affair.

In the biblical context we read about today, it is hard to imagine Bathsheba sensing any choice with regard to the king’s interest in her, other than to comply or die. Surely she understood as Queen Vashti did in the book of Esther that those who don’t dance for the king—be that in the throne room or between the sheets—don’t live to tell of their refusal.²

David’s power and authority in the realm was a given for him. He was undeterred by the fact that she was a married woman and the wife of a soldier in his army.

Smitten by Bathsheba’s beauty, David sent a messenger to invite her to come to the palace. Once inside she was immediately escorted to the king’s chambers. The historian left the bedroom scene to our imaginations. Bathsheba returned home as quickly as she arrived. A few weeks later, she sent word to the king through a messenger that she was pregnant.

² Esther 1:15–20.

The plot thickens. In order to avoid responsibilities for paternity, David attempts to arrange a reunion of Uriah and Bathsheba. The king sends a messenger to his commander, Joab, to send Uriah home with a report on the war.

Uriah does as he is ordered. He returns to Jerusalem with good news from the front. The king commends Uriah and encourages him to go down to his house and “wash his feet.” Now, in case you missed a beat, I’ll point out that the historian was not talking about some proto-Maundy-Thursday “foot washing” here. The word “feet” in the Old Testament was a biblical euphemism for another part of the male anatomy, and foot washing was a metaphor for sexual intercourse. (I’m telling you. The Bible is way more interesting than you thought. You may want to reconsider your summer reading list.)

Out of respect for his men, Uriah would not go down to his house. He would not wash his feet. He would not enjoy the comforts of home, while his men were out risking their lives on the battlefield.

While the king might have, under other circumstances, admired Uriah for his moral fortitude and the solidarity that he evidenced for his men, Uriah’s persistence thwarted the King’s cover-up. So the next night, David got Uriah drunk, and tried again to get him to go home, and enjoy the company of his wife. Uriah still would not go. Instead, he kept watch on the palace steps with his men—at least until he passed out.

David, now desperate to hide his sin, awoke in the morning, and prepared written orders for his commander, Joab, which he sent with Uriah. David’s marching orders were these: send Uriah to the most dangerous part of the battlefield and tell him to lead the charge. Then in the thick of battle, tell your men to retreat.

Joab did as the king commanded. The orders were given. Uriah led the charge, and he and others were killed in the line of duty.

Today’s reading comes to a close with the tragic and ironic death of Uriah, the king’s faithful soldier, and is framed by the ancient biographer in II Samuel, as the beginning of the end of Israel’s best loved and most favored king, King David.

V

So what are we to make of David’s downfall?

On the one hand we could say, well, David’s no different than other ancient kings, and modern persons of wealth and power. He had motives, like the rest of us, but way more opportunity to act.

We could say that his affair with Bathsheba and his plot which brought about Uriah’s death were a sign that something had unraveled in his personal life and his relationship with God that were in desperate need of healing—healing that didn’t begin before more

damage was done. Personally, in modern cases, more often than not, adultery is often the result and not the beginning of a relationship coming unraveled.

Getting back to David for a moment, though, in the larger narrative of his life, what we will learn about him is that he eventually does come to face the truth about his life, and in facing that truth and in taking responsibility for his actions the healing can begin. This is why David was a hero to the Jewish people. It was not that he was a goodie-two-shoes, because he wasn't. It was that he stopped hiding from the truth about his life. He acknowledged the errors of his ways. And he took responsibility for his actions.

Reflecting on our own experience again, I suspect that we would agree that it is not easy to be honest about our motives, particularly the less laudatory ones. But the lesson we can learn from David's life is that there is freedom and grace that flow from facing up to our motives, from owning up to our behavior, and from acknowledging to God and others the truth about our lives—and that truth can set us free.

The other good news illuminated in David's story is that ours is a God who can hold the burdens that are in our hearts. Ours is a God who can hear our confessions and prayers for forgiveness. Ours is a God who can help us find a way out of the worst messes that we can get ourselves into. If you want more proof of these truths, come back next Sunday, for another chapter in the page-turning, dog-eared saga of David's life known as II Samuel. Amen.