

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

August 2, 2009

Sin Adds to Sin

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 51:1-12; 2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a

In my years as a camp counselor at a sleep-away camp in Tennessee, one of my duties was to prepare nightly devotionals for the boys in my cabin. This took place after the boys were in their cots and the cabin lights had been turned out. There was a spiritual purpose to this evening ritual but also a practical one. We wanted to keep the boys quiet and in their beds, and, hopefully, they'd soon drift off to sleep. The plan worked best if the devotional kept the boys' interest so that they wouldn't get distracted by their own conversation.

That's why one night, in a cabin of 15-year-old boys, I retold the story of David and Bathsheba. Did I ever keep their interest that night! "That story is in the Bible?" they demanded to know. Most of the boys thought I'd made it up, or at least added the juicy parts. Finally, I had to turn the lights back on and let them see for themselves. The story is in the Bible: the whole sorry, sordid tale of a king who takes sexual advantage of one of his subjects, tries to use her husband to cover up his own misdeeds, and ultimately has the husband killed when that doesn't work out.

To this point it sounds rather like a soap opera plot. With sex and violence. A powerful character who tries to manipulate the other actors. Intrigue and even murder.

Just this weekend, I officiated at the burial of a former radio soap opera star. Her stage name was Patsy Campbell, and among her acting credits, she was a part of the cast of long-running show called “The Second Mrs. Burton.” This was the very last soap opera to be broadcast on network radio. From the family’s stories, it sounded like she had a fabulous time in her work, and I can imagine that doing this kind of acting is great fun. The melodrama. The exaggerated expressions, the pitch of voice used to convey emotion and intensity, not in front of a camera, but through a microphone. That requires an actor who really wants to get into their part.

No doubt, the audiences really got into it, too. Tuning in each week to hear the story unfold, rooting for the good guys, hoping the bad guys would get their comeuppance.

In the larger-than-life story of the great king David, the cheering stops when we come to the episode of David and Bathsheba.

It’s not a story we ordinarily include in the typical Sunday school curriculum. Or if we do, we tend to sanitize the most brutal details. One children’s Bible summarizes the plot this way. “King David saw Bathsheba taking a bath. He

thought she was beautiful and wanted to marry her. But Bathsheba was already married. So David did something awful. He made sure her husband was killed in battle. God was angry. But when David was sorry for what he had done, God forgave him.”¹

Now, just to correct one glaring error in this version, David did not want to marry Bathsheba. He just wanted to have sex with her. Obviously, that is not a part of the story that a child would be ready to hear, but over the centuries, more than a few adults have been unprepared to hear this unpleasant detail, either. Some have taken the story and romanticized it, turned into a great love story. Some others have tried to shift the blame to the husband Uriah. It was his fault for not paying enough attention to his wife. Equally offensive, Bathsheba has sometimes been blamed. She seduced David, some have claimed. It was not David’s fault.

A word of caution is in order here about how quickly we move onto shaky moral ground when we fail to distinguish properly between perpetrator and victim. Unfortunately, it happens far too often. A child is blamed for the beating he receives from his mother. A woman is blamed for being raped by a husband or a stranger. A young person is blamed for being harassed by bullies at school.

No doubt there are some situations where blame is shared, but that is not the case with David, Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. Certainly, the prophet Nathan

holds David responsible, and in the end David acknowledges, without excuses, how completely he has erred.

This complex sequence of events begins as David leans over his balcony, and strains to get a good angle on a young woman down below who is taking a bath. He's standing in a place he shouldn't be standing, and he's watching an activity he shouldn't be watching. We don't know their ages, but we can guess. David is probably middle aged. She's likely still a teenager. To use the lingo that teenagers use, David, King David, is a creeper, staring at a girl. More than that, he sends for her. He doesn't yell out to her. He doesn't whistle at her. There is no subtle effort to lure her in. No flattery or promises. He just sends a servant to bring her to his chambers. How could any girl say 'no' to that?

If you feel yourself recoiling at my description, then I think you are right where the Biblical writers want you to be, because what happens next is much worse, culminating in the murder of Uriah. Of course, the original sin is bad enough, but it is the cover-up that leads to such tragic results. It is a case of sin being added onto sin until great damage is done.

In fact, because the tale is so disturbing it's reasonable to ask why the Biblical writers themselves decide to tell it all. Maybe they could have prettied up the harsh edges. Maybe they could have gone easy on the worst parts, left out some

of the ugliest details. But the Biblical writers do not want to be a part of the cover-up, too.

So we are left, not with the great hero David, a mighty king, invincible commander of armies, a faithful servant of the Lord, but rather a very fallen, very broken, very sinful man.

We discover time and again in the Biblical narrative that there is no person who deserves our worship, no human actor who can command unqualified praise.

I recently learned of the terrible fall of a man I have long respected. He was a member of the Presbytery that took me under care as a Candidate for the ministry. When he stood to speak in a meeting, everyone listened, because his words were thoughtful and wise. He served well in various churches; he was kind and encouraging to me when I was a young pastor and we were both members of another Presbytery. But, he really blew it. I know nothing of the details, but he was arrested for a sexual indiscretion. And I am left wondering about those good things that he did, perhaps years ago. Do they matter? Were they real? Do they count still, if a ledger somewhere weighs the good in the world against its evil?

Of course, they do. Goodness has its own value, never to exonerate us from the sins we commit, yet true goodness stands on its own and cannot be erased.

The life of faith never moves in a straight line. We wish it did always get better and better. We wish we could go from one exhilarating, satisfying, fulfilling

experience to the next. But the life of faith has highs and lows. Peaks and valleys. Some of those valleys can be terribly deep. Often, we put ourselves in those places.

But, here is the gospel news. When we go into those low places, God follows us there. We may have turned from God, but God does not turn from us. We may have leapt into the profoundest depths of disobedience, but God does not abandon us.

In our story this day, God pursues David through the voice of the prophet Nathan who speaks truth to power. God does not give up on David. He confronts him in his moral stupor. He awakens him from his ethical slumber. The prophet tells a simple story, and in his rage-filled reaction to it, David indicts himself. God now has David's full attention. David did not even know he had gone into that valley. David did not realize that he had jumped off a cliff. But, God finds him there, and awakens him. Opening his eyes, David can look up and see how far he has fallen.

There is judgment, harsh judgment, but how else could David begin climbing again? After judgment and repentance, comes hope.

I am not sure that I made that point when I told the story to those fifteen-year-old boys in Hemlock cabin. I knew from the start that they wanted to hear the sexy part. I want to make sure you hear the redemptive part. David's story

culminates not with his own triumph and victory but with God's rescue. That is the way our story works, too.

It never culminates with our triumphant victory but with God's rescue and salvation, and for that we must give thanks!

Amen.

¹ Kenneth N. Taylor, *The Picture Bible for Little People* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).