

“God’s Providence”
II Samuel 7:1-17
II Samuel 11-12, selected verses
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Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

INTRODUCTION

Last week we heard the story of David’s calling. God sent the prophet Samuel to Jesse’s house in Bethlehem to choose the next king of Israel. Samuel assumed it was the oldest son God had in mind ... or the next oldest ... or the next oldest. Seven sons were paraded in front of Samuel, and God told him clearly that none of these were the one. When Samuel pressed, Jesse said his youngest son, David, was keeping the sheep. When he was brought back from the fields, Samuel anointed the boy David as the rising king who would eventually replace King Saul. Why was David chosen? Not because of his stature, or prominence, or because he was first-born, or any other outward reason. He was chosen because, Scripture says, God looks not on outward appearances, but on the heart.

One of David’s first acts was to offer himself to fight the giant Philistine enemy, Goliath. David couldn’t even maneuver in Saul’s armor, he was so small, and so unused to it. So instead of going after Goliath with swords and spears, David took down Goliath with a measly stone in a slingshot. The hand of God was with him.

Today we pick up after King Saul has died. David’s call as King is confirmed by the people. His first official act is to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem – the new capital city. And the next thing he does is seek to build a house for God – a permanent building to replace the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, which has traveled with the king and warriors wherever they’ve gone.

Intriguingly, God says no. It isn’t David’s calling to build God a house – a Temple, “Beth-el,” literally, house of God. That job will belong to David’s son, whoever succeeds him in time. But as we just heard, God does an amazing thing: God promises to make David a house. What does that mean?

God will make David not a building, but a *dynasty*. Moreover, God will not only make a house *for* David, but *out of* David.

So ... “house of David” means not just “David’s house,” but “house-made-of-David.” The DNA, if you will, of David will live on forever. The legacy of David will live on forever. And, above all, the “heart” of David that God saw from the very beginning will live on forever.

God promises an eternal covenant with David’s house – never, ever to forsake that love. A thousand years later, that promise will manifest in Jesus: out of the root of Jesse, out of the house and lineage of David.

Would that we could close with that happy ending. The problem is that even the finest leaders are vulnerable; even the strongest warriors can succumb to unfamiliar threats, from within and without. Let us look at the second lesson: a reading from II Samuel 11:1-12:24, selected verses.

We usually think of the story of David and Bathsheba in terms of the sin of adultery. And of course, adultery was an obvious element of this tragedy. But too often, we focus on sexual sin as an easy shortcut, a litmus test of someone’s faith or fall. But I am convinced that sex outside of marriage was the absolute least of David’s troubles – and his greater failings are a crucial lesson for anyone who has ever been in leadership.

There are three major failings in David’s actions:

First, David relinquished authority: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent his general and his officers and all Israel. But David remained at Jerusalem.” At the time when kings go out to war, David *didn’t go out to war*. He was expected to lead, but he stayed home and let others do his job for him. Instead of carrying his responsibilities, he exempted himself from danger, exempted himself from conflict, exempted himself from the expectation of the leader to LEAD. David abandoned his troops, his general, and his authority – exactly when it was needed most.

Second, David abused his power. As king, he was expected to serve and protect. Instead he sent for Bathsheba, and with no consent on her part, demanded sex from her. As king, David was expected to submit to the law of God. Instead he exempted himself from the very rules that he was in charge of insuring those under him fulfill. David knew that no one would stop him.

Third, David tried to hide what he'd done, and deny responsibility. He covered his tracks, which was worse than the original sin. When he found out Bathsheba was pregnant, instead of coming clean, David tried to get Bathsheba's husband Uriah back in bed with her so it would look like the child was his. Ironically, Uriah was more faithful to his country and his fellow-soldiers than the king was, and he wouldn't go home. So David sent Uriah back to the front lines, carrying a message to the general, which proved to be Uriah's own death warrant. David's people depended on his trustworthiness and integrity. Instead he exempted himself from accountability and truth, and made it worse by killing the very man he had wronged.

So what are we to make of this? I believe that any of us who have power – corporate power, relational power, civic power, financial power, intellectual power, artistic power – ANY of us who have any power whatsoever are prone to abusing it. Lord Acton famously said, “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In fact he said more than that. Listen to this brief excerpt from his letter to Archbishop Creighton:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. . . . Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. . . . There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it. That is the point at which . . . the end learns to justify the means.ⁱ

Wow. I can think of a thousand examples of this, and my guess is you can too.

- The CEO who lets his second-in-command take the heat for a failed product roll-out or manufacturing flaw – like the execs at VW who tried to hide emissions flaws in their diesel cars, and then cover up the lies..
- The politician or newsmaker who enhances the life-narrative or academic resume, and then, when questions inevitably arise, tries to pretend that it really happened – like Brian Williams’ misstatements about his heroism.
- The benefit chair who savors her time in the spotlight – in magazines and on the news –while her underlings do all the heavy-lifting ... or the husband who gives lip-service to the marriage when it’s obvious to everyone he’s far more interested in his rising-star career ...or the religious leader who cherishes her self-righteous morality while she viciously throws her “frenemy” under the bus ... all of them fully believing the illusion they’re creating that they are somehow doing such great things.

And none of them – not one of them – at the time has any glimmer of recognition of what it is they’re doing.

I’ve actually come up with my own phrase for it: “Terminal exceptionalism.” Terminal exceptionalism. The higher up the food chain, the more susceptible we are. Blinded by power. Covered by yes-men. Numbed into self-deceit by constantly getting whatever we want.

And if *that* were the end of the story, it would be sad indeed. But God doesn’t end this story there. *Of course* God doesn’t end this story there.

The story of David gives me hope. It gives me hope that God isn’t done with us, even when we relinquish authority, abuse power, lie to ourselves and everyone else, savor our self-righteousness, or any other reckless act of covering ourselves. Instead God intervenes ... and the first thing God does is uncover the truth – not with brutality, but with compassion.

I love the way the prophet Nathan “speaks the truth with love,” a thousand years before that phrase was written in Ephesians 4! Nathan tells David the truth with compassion and gentleness – evoking David’s compassion for the poor man whose beloved lamb was stolen by the rich man. Nathan doesn’t start by accusing David, which would just make David defensive. Instead, he appeals to David’s heart, knowing that that the heart that God once saw in the young boy David – the heart of the shepherd in the fields - is still there in the powerful king David. And beneath the bluster, beneath the entitlement, beneath the impunity, beneath the power, beneath the terminal exceptionalism, David’s heart really *is* still there, able to feel compassion.

Second, God holds David accountable. God’s prophet doesn’t pat David on the head and say, don’t worry about it. Nathan doesn’t turn away and pretend that nothing happened. That would be disastrous – because it would just make David feel all the more entitled to do whatever he felt like with impunity. No, it’s critical for David’s well-being – and it’s critical for Israel’s well-being – that David is held accountable for the mess that he’s made. And note that God doesn’t hold David accountable for vindictiveness, or for crossing the t’s and dotting the I’s of legality. No, there are consequences for his actions. God holds David accountable for the sake of a better future.

And finally, God brings resurrection – new life – to David – remarkably, through the very relationship that was the result of his sin. This is a key point in the whole story. We forget because of our modern sensibilities that – as was legal and customary at the time - David has many wives, and God could have chosen any one of them to be the mother of the next king. But remarkably – astonishingly - it is through BATHSHEBA that God’s blessing continues. Bathsheba bears a son to David. His name is Solomon. And HE will be the king of Israel, who will be known for his wisdom. The wisdom of Solomon blesses not only his kingdom but people far and wide, including the Queen of Sheba who comes for advice. And eventually ... well, eventually, it is through

Solomon that the root of Jesse continues to thrive. Until a thousand years later, Jesus is born ... the Son of David ... through none other than David and Bathsheba's son, Solomon.

What does this mean to us?

I believe God continues to provide: God tells the truth to us, if we will listen - not by beating us up but by evoking our compassion.

And I believe God continues to provide: God holds us accountable - not sweeping consequences under the rug, but shining the light of love with the truth that sets us free.

And I believe God continues to provide: God continues to bring resurrection and new life – taking the dust and ashes of our broken pieces, with a new creation only God can bring.

That's what God did with David. And that's what God is still doing with us. And when that happens, our power is transformed into a force for good beyond what we could imagine.

One last word: is power always bad? Of course not. But everything depends on how it's used. Today in the Christian calendar, it is Christ the King Sunday – the Sunday just before Advent begins. It is the day when we celebrate the kingship of Jesus – son of Joseph ... son of Solomon ... son of David. It is the day when we remember the good that power can accomplish, when it is rendered with humility ... when it is rendered in the way of Jesus Christ.

Twenty-six years ago this week, my husband and I stood in the chancel at Fourth Church in Chicago and exchanged our vows of marriage. This is the Scripture that was read that day; listen to these words from Paul's letter to the Philippians; listen to God's word to us today:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure - children of God – who shine like stars in the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Lord Acton (John Emerich Edward Dalberg), Letter to Archbishop Mandell Creighton, Apr. 5, 1887. This letter is part of a larger conversation about how historians should judge the past. Mandell Creighton, an Archbishop of the Church of England, objected to what he saw as a modern tendency to be unnecessarily critical of authority figures.
<http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165acton.html>