

Sermon: August 1, 2021 – 2 Samuel 11

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

For decades, I have been both impressed and troubled by the way the Bible approaches the story and legacy of King David.

We will all, I think, be familiar with David, the slingshot boy, the harpist and Psalmist, the military tactician. But that is far from the full story. As described by Jonathan Kirsch, “David, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible is, above all, a man of profound contradictions. He is described as “a man after God’s own heart” by one biblical author, and “a bloodstained fiend of hell” by another. The word “Satan” is used in the Hebrew Bible to describe David as an adversary. He is depicted as feigning madness in a cowardly attempt to avoid the wrath of the king of the Philistines. He carried off the wife of a man named Nabal after shaking him down for flocks and herds under threat of violence... and had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, sending her husband to the front lines to be killed. [His is a story] full of sexual and physical violence, passion, scandal, dysfunction, and outrageous moral excess.”

No biography of a person will include all the events and details – there is always a winnowing out of the wheat from the chaff. With this in mind, the Biblical inclusion of this episode of David and Bathsheba, in which David’s abuse of power is truly prodigious, has always struck me as curious. While the aftermath of the episode includes a moral confrontation by the prophet Nathan, forcing David to face up to what he has done and the expected consequences of these evil deeds – this is the kind of story that you might prefer to sweep under the carpet and keep out of view, especially if you’re intending the protagonist of the story to be regarded positively. Yes, David is remembered as a great tactical leader but the Bible makes clear that this is no idealized, near-perfect, one-step-away-from-God hero.

This mixed legacy of David raises a question – a question very much being wrestled with across Canada and the US and, I suspect, in other lands as well – that is, “how rotten does the legacy of a person or a program or even a nation need to be, before it crosses the line from ‘instructive to us, including the evil parts’ to ‘totally reprehensible and needs to be purged?’” This question of legacy, is an age-old one that goes much deeper than just deciding whose image goes on a statue or a dollar bill, whose name goes on a stadium or a school, whose version of history gets accepted. It is, for me, a question of how we view ourselves and how God views us.

One of the Netflix series we’ve been watching as light entertainment is called AJ and the Queen, featuring none other than RuPaul. RuPaul’s character has just been defrauded of their life’s savings by someone who pretended to love them, and when asked the question of how much they hate this person, replied by saying that long ago, they’d been taught that “a person isn’t just one thing”. Yes, this person stole thousands of dollars but their memory for RuPaul included special, loving, tender moments they shared together. Were the activities criminal? Yes. Were they devastatingly hurtful and harmful? Yes. Did they elicit hatred? Well, no.

To be honest, things would be a lot tidier if I could just divide the world into yea and nay; those who are 100% good and those who are 100% bad; “we,” who are right and “they”, who are wrong. Sadly, there is a growing tendency toward this dismissive binary of goodness and badness as societal fractures get deeper and positions more entrenched.

This, however, is a fundamentally flawed approach to the art of living. In its first words, our sacred text in the book of Genesis, reveals that in God’s eyes, the very core of the entire created order is its goodness. The land and the seas, the day and the night, all living beings

including us humans, are declared by God as good. Good, as in, bearing the creative imprint of God, not good as in perfect. Good as in that which God delights in – not good as in faultless. Built into that beautiful flower is that misshapen petal; built into that human mind that is so good at artistic expression, might be challenges with math or history. All of what we see is beloved by God, but nowhere is it suggested that we are perfect or that we should expect ourselves or others to be so. And when this basic assumption gets short-circuited, the result can be self-aggrandizement or self-loathing, or a simplistic division of the world into those who can do no wrong and those who do nothing but wrong.

Repeatedly through life, we are reminded that we are fully reliant on God's gift of grace. When a decision I make goes sour for me or, even more so, when a decision I make creates difficulty for someone else, God does not condemn me for it. When I choose the easy and comfortable way over ways that are more difficult but will contribute more to the greater common good, and even when I make that same choice again and again, I am not cast out by God. When I pretend that something I am praised for makes me a better person, and when I will not forgive myself for something I cannot do anything about, God steps in and helps me re-size myself to proper proportions. These things I know to be true in my own life and if they are true in my life they have to be true in broader ways.

Travelling along with this gift of grace is the gift of humility. In life we are called to embrace the gifts bestowed upon us but also to be fully aware that is a call to engage and to learn and to stumble and to grow. I am called in this human journey to walk humbly with my God, not to figure that there is some standard of infallibility set by me or by someone else that I need to measure up to. I am neither entirely right nor entirely wrong, all good or all bad, but I am loved, and held in grace.

If we can start with that self-knowledge, might that also help in assessing others? I hope so. I hope that this knowledge that nobody, NOBODY is perfect, will allow me to admire another human being, perhaps even strive to emulate them, knowing that someone, somewhere, knows something about them that I wouldn't be happy about. I hope that my admission of my own shortcomings will bring an element of graciousness to my assessment of others, who, like me, are human beings muddling through this journey of life. But this acknowledgement of human imperfection does not mean that we just turn a blind eye to areas where change or healing is needed. We are accountable for all that was done at the Indian Residential Schools, we have a lot to answer for. And King David does not get a free pass for – let's call it what it is - his rape of Bathsheba or his murder of Uriah. His legacy is fully and eternally tarnished.

God does not expect me to be infallible but God does demand that I be accountable. Choices I make, unintentionally or intentionally, will have implications for other people and for this planet. Things that my forebears have done which I have received as an inheritance, come with a cost that I am accountable for. And going beyond the personal, programs and institutions and social constructs that intentionally build in advantages for members of one ethnicity or religion or sexual orientation or gender or any other identifier, while devaluing entire other groups of people, are to be challenged as contrary to God's loving embrace of all. If functioning properly, being able to celebrate life's joys while owning up to life's blunders, can allow us to see life much more from a God's-eye-view. I don't need to build up my heroes so high that they must be struck down at some future date, and I don't need people I dislike to be so totally demonized that they are beyond any kind of redemption. But I do want to live in a world where we are accountable to one another for the words we choose,

for the actions we make, for things in my life that are easy because the lives of others have been made difficult.

Has all of this taken the story of David and Bathsheba, and tied it up nicely with a bow? No, it hasn't. There is a LOT that David needed to answer for, and by my read of things, others ended up paying a lot of that price for him. But it is instructive, methinks, to have these places in our sacred story where deep, terrible flaws are looked at, and engaged – sometimes satisfactorily, sometimes not – and held within our understanding of how God relates to us and what God expects of us. We as humans – as a group and each one of us singularly - have the ability to create things of beauty and the capacity to enact pain and hardship. Christ calls us not to ignore that, or to try to escape the moral ambiguity of it all by dividing the world into good people and bad people, but to own it – and to believe in a God motivated by justice and filled with grace. At this time when so many things in our world are at a crossroads, we are invited to integrate that grace and justice into our choices rather than getting sidetracked by denial or vengeance. May that invitation be heard, and received, and lived. Amen.

References cited:

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See also

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