

“A Swift Kick in the Pants”

I.

He almost got away with it.

Almost.

Last week, we hit a low point in our summer sermon series on the life of King David, as the shepherd boy’s shadow side emerged in the story of David and Bathsheba. Instead of the star-crossed romance we may have remembered from some old sermons or Sunday school lessons, the actual story turned out to be a brutal, ugly little tale that plumbed the depths of David’s depravity. David *saw* Bathsheba; David *wanted* Bathsheba; David *took* Bathsheba—an exercise in raw power masquerading as royal prerogative. But then something happened that even the king could not control: Bathsheba got pregnant. So David connived and conspired to cover up his crime, only to be thwarted at every turn by the unimpeachable integrity of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah—a tenaciously righteous man. In the end, David did what he thought he had to do. If Uriah could not be managed or manipulated, than Uriah had to be murdered. The curtain came down last week with the blood of an innocent man on David’s hands, but his scheme seemed to succeed. He had solved his problem, saved his reputation, and nobody knew what David had done.

Well...almost nobody.

As our story opens this morning, Bathsheba learns of the death of her husband. As is so often the case in this story, we know nothing of her thoughts or feelings in this matter.¹ Is she shocked at the news? Caught by surprise? Or not so much? Had she already started to secretly suspect that something like this might happen? he knows exactly what David is capable of; she had good reason to fear for her husband’s life. But the text does not dwell on any of these things—like Joe Friday, it just sticks to the facts: Uriah dies, Bathsheba hears the news, she grieves for the accustomed period of time—seven lousy days, just in case you were wondering²—and then, before the grass can even grow on Uriah’s grave, Bathsheba is moved into the palace and married to the king. Six months later—approximately—she bears him a son.

And David almost gets away with it.

Almost.

II.

Chapter 12 opens on an ominous note: “*But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.*” This is unusual—not that the LORD would be displeased with injustice, but that the story would stop to tell us about it. The Book of Samuel usually likes to stick to the story and let us to draw our own conclusions.³

But not this time. David’s deeds are so far beyond the pale, so completely and utterly unacceptable, that God must get involved. Enter the prophet Nathan—selected by God and set on a collision course with the king, sent to expose low deeds done in high places and confront corrupted power. It is a perilous assignment. Remember, David just ordered the death of innocent Uriah and never even batted an eye, never lost a single moment of sleep. The king has gone over the edge. Who knows what else he may do? To

stand in his presence and speak *this* truth to *his* face may well cost Nathan his life.

Knowing this, Nathan decides to take an indirect approach –to tell the truth, but to tell it slant;⁴ to practice the prophetic art of subversive story-telling.⁵

“There are these two guys –one is filthy rich and lives in a great big mansion; the other gets by on his disability checks and the occasional odd job; he lives in a broken down old trailer at the end of a dusty old dirt road. They do, however, have one thing in common: they both raise animals. The rich man has an enormous livestock operation: several thousand head of cattle, as I recall, and probably an equal number of sheep. The poor guy has one little lamb –although it wasn’t really a farm animal, more like a pet. You see, he never had any kids of his own, and so he got kind of emotionally invested in this little lamb. It lived in his house and drank from his cup and slept in his bed. His Facebook page was really nothing more than a bunch of pictures of that lamb: the lamb lying in the sun; the lamb on a leash, taking a walk; the lamb and the poor man in their matching Christmas sweaters –you know, stuff like that. Point is: he really loves that little lamb.

“Well, one day the rich guy has some guests fly in from out of town and he wants to fix them a nice dinner but he doesn’t really want to thin his own herd, so he gets this bright idea. He sends some of his thugs down to the poor man’s trailer, has them take that little lamb right out of his arms and dinner is served. Pass the mint sauce.”

Nathan’s story has its intended effect. Purple-faced with righteous rage, practically foaming at the mouth, the king leaps out of his throne and on to his feet: “That man deserves to die! How dare he! I order him to pay the poor man back fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.”

And so the king passes judgment on himself. Nathan takes a deep breath, swallows hard, and utters four little words: “You are the man.”

If I had been there that day, instead of the prophet Nathan, I think that would have been enough. “Thanks for your time, O King, and have a nice day. I’ll just show myself out.” But Nathan is made of sterner stuff than I am. He decides to elaborate. And as he does so, we learn something else, something remarkable: *God takes this personally*. David has not only committed a heinous crime against Bathsheba and Uriah; David has grieved the heart of God. And the prophet gives voice to God’s pain.

“Thus says the LORD: I plucked you out of a field, made you king over all of Israel and saved you from all your enemies. I gave you everything you ever wanted and I would have given you even more. But you *forgot* –about me, about my covenant with you, forgot who you are and to whom you belong. So now the sword shall never depart from your house. These things that you have done will have *consequences* –like a heavy rock heaved into a quiet pond, your actions will ripple through your family and your kingdom for generations to come.” What David did in secret will be dragged out into the harsh light of day.⁶ What David did in one stupid, selfish moment will disrupt the lives of everyone he loves for decades to come.

But the ending of this passage is the reason we remember David; the reason we tell his story still. For the first time in a long time, David speaks the truth: “*I have sinned against the LORD.*”

Yes. Yes he has. But he has already turned the corner. To see the truth, and to say it, is the first step into the harsh and healing grace of God.

II.

So I guess it is true what they say: Ignorance *is* bliss. But it is a cheap and hollow and fleeting sort of bliss –like the first pangs of puppy love, like state-fair cotton candy: something that seems wonderful at the time but makes you nauseous later on.

David sure seemed blissful in his ignorance. He maybe even managed to convince himself that he got away with something, that it is, in fact, good to be the king. But then God sent a prophet to demolish David's ignorance, to shatter David's bliss, to tell him the truth about himself and his sin. And by the grace of God, he saw it. He came to understand exactly what he had done.

Sometimes grace feels like a swift kick in the pants. Sometimes that is exactly what we need.

I have to be careful here. I don't want to step on anybody's toes. A lot of us at Plymouth grew up in *other* churches –judgmental, angry, maybe even abusive churches. And some of us are still trying to get over it. So we can be still a little touchy. Certain words make us queasy -words like “confession,” or “repentance” or “sin.” We came here to get away from all of that, to focus on the love and inclusion and grace of God.

And that is great. I want to do that too. But there is an enormous difference between amazing grace and ignorant bliss. Do you know why so many people say that the church is full of hypocrites? Because it is. Because, let's face it: we church folk have an uncanny knack for being oblivious. I know I do. We can complain until we are blue in the face about all of the greed and materialism that drives our society without ever thinking to examine our own behavior as consumers; we can bemoan violence and war from our privileged perch within the world's last military superpower; we can fret and fuss and wring our hands about all of the injustice in the world without ever owning up to the injustice in our hearts. In short, we are ignorant – fiercely, stubbornly, blissfully ignorant. And too many times we mistake our ignorant bliss for the amazing grace of God.

So let me say this just as clearly as I can: God loves you. God loves you unconditionally. God loves you exactly the way that you are. *But* God loves you entirely too much to leave you that way. Whether you know it or not, you are here to be changed. And you simply can not draw near to God without giving up your ignorance, without discovering some unpleasant truth about yourself. Bliss comes cheap; grace will cost you. But that is how we get better. That is the way that we start to change; the way we become the people God always intended us to be.

David almost got away with it...until God's grace got a hold of him.⁷ When we manage to see and say the truth about ourselves—no matter how harsh it may happen to sound—then we will know that we too have been found by the amazing grace of God.

And that will probably feel like a swift kick in the pants.

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Notes

¹ Bathsheba remains an enigmatic and in many ways a troubling figure—the story objectifies her much in the same way that David did. She is routinely reduced to a cipher or a plot device, but she is always portrayed as something less than a full person.

² So says *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), p.483.

³ See Bruce Birch's comments in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp.1291-1296.

⁴ With apologies to Emily Dickinson

⁵ Nathan's role in this story could make for an entirely different sermon. He is, in many ways, the ideal figure of a prophet of Israel. He speaks truth to power, but (like Jesus after him) does so through subversive story-telling, so as to get a hearing. He also illustrates Israel's genius in having prophets who could confront the king when the king was in the wrong—a move that in some ways anticipates the modern idea of the separation of church and state. For more on that, see John C. Holbert's discussion in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*. Roger E. Van Harn, Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.210-213.

⁶ I owe that particular way of wording it to Brueggemann, et al. *Texts for Preaching—Year B: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp.449-451.

⁷ To speak in more theological terms, what we encounter in the story of David—particularly this chapter of David's story—is the mystery of God's *election*. Why would God choose this incredibly flawed person, over all others, to be the anointed king over Israel? And the answer is always the same: Because God wants to. Because God is gracious. Because this is the kind of thing that God always does. As Karl Barth writes: "If we understand this, we can also understand that the story of David's sin...for from being in contradiction to the presentation of him as a figure of light in contrast with Saul, is absolutely indispensable to this presentation...And yet it is as this man that he is the king by God's grace—as the man who in this sinfulness is utterly dependent upon the mercy and forgiveness of God, who is enabled to stand only because God stands and supports him, who has nothing to offer God except his need." *Church Dogmatics*. II, 2. (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.383.