

To Tell the Truth

A sermon by Angie Witmer at Plymouth UCC based on 2 Samuel 11:1-15
Sunday, July 26, 2009

Here's a question for you. What do these three things have in common: the Iowa State Fair, the first day of school, and the final installment of Plymouth's summer sermon series?

Answer: they are all just a few weeks away. I hate saying it out loud, because somehow that makes it all a little more real. But it's true: summer is winding down. I know, it's only the end of July—it seems like summer has just begun, especially with the crazy weather this year! But soon it will be time to put away the shorts and flip flops and dig out sweaters and corduroys. In about a month, the choirs will start singing again around here, Sunday School will start again—so will confirmation. Heck, before you know it, the Matins will be out raking leaves. (sigh). I'm not quite ready for summer to end.

And it may sound geeky—probably because it is geeky—but I'm not ready for this sermon series on the life of King David to end either. This is one of the reasons that time has flown by so quickly for me this year. Every week, I've looked forward to what's going to happen next as David moved from being in pastoral fields to battle fields, as he moved from being a baby brother to a mighty king, as he moved from life on the farm to life in the palace. I laughed out loud the week that David danced the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. That was a great story. And so was the one about David's grief over the loss of Jonathan—that one moved me to tears. Yup. I've loved every minute of this saga so far.

Why? Probably because I truly want to believe that if all of those great things could happen to somebody like David, they could happen to me, too. Oh, I know. I may not look like I just walked off the cover of a fashion magazine. I may not have written hundreds of songs that people will be singing for thousands of years. And I may not have slain a giant or built up a great kingdom. But I am chosen by God. Just like David was. We all are. So this is our story. And that's pretty cool.

The problem I have now is that if the story so far has been about me—about us—and all of the amazing things we can do with and for God, then the story today must be about us, too...and all of the things that can happen to us when we turn away from God.

I can't say that I'm crazy about that idea. But it's true. This is our story, as difficult as it is to hear. David has fallen. Hard. Not in love, mind you. Not even from grace. But he has fallen off of the pedestal, out of touch, and away from God. And if it can happen to someone like David...well...it can most certainly happen to us.

This chapter of our story starts out with the reminder that this is “the season when kings go to battle”, but David doesn't go to battle. Instead, he sends Joab in his place. We don't know why—the story doesn't say—but David decides to stay home and sit this one out.

And on this particular day, while he's at home and his soldiers are off at war, David gets up from what appears to be his afternoon nap on the couch, strolls over to the window and catches sight of Bathsheba. The beautiful, bathing Bathsheba. And then and there, he decides that he needs her. It doesn't matter that she's married to somebody else—actually, her story or what she wants really doesn't seem to matter to him at all. He just knows that he wants what he wants. So he sends for her. Gets her. Takes her. Sends her back home. And that would be that, if David had his way.

But David didn't get his way...and that wasn't that. "I am pregnant." Three little words David hadn't counted on.

Oops. Now what? Well...he could come clean, apologize and try to make the best of the situation. He could even talk to God about it—God's always been there for him before. Maybe God could help him out now.

Nah. Important people don't need God, right? What does he need God for? He's the King now. He's powerful. He'll just handle it himself. No big deal. So he does. He comes up with a fail-proof plan: he'll bring Bathsheba's husband Uriah home from war (under the guise of getting a battle update) and then, as a sign of his gratitude for all that Uriah has done in the service of his King and on behalf of Israel, David will give Uriah a few days to rest and relax with his lovely wife Bathsheba. Not only will that make Bathsheba's pregnancy appear to be legitimate, it will also make David even more popular with the troops—a king who gives r&r ? Sweet! They'll love him. And Bathsheba and Uriah will be the proud parents of a premature baby. All will be well.

Genius.

The problem is, as is the case with most genius schemes, it didn't work. David didn't count on the fact that Uriah was a dedicated soldier both on and off of the battlefield. His loyalty to King and country and the ark of the covenant—his loyalty to God—would not allow him to even entertain the idea of an evening at home while his comrades were off fighting a war. So Uriah gave his report to David and then slept at the palace, ready to return to battle the next day.

Dang. Now what was David going to do? Well, he could still talk to God, tell the truth, deal with the issue head on...nah. He's the KING. He's the man. He can handle this. No big deal. He knows where Uriah is coming from now, so he'll just come up with Plan B, that's all. And that's exactly what he did.

Plan B. Operation Tequila. Alcohol. That should loosen Uriah up. David figured he'd have Uriah stay one more day, stuff him full of good food and some stiff drinks. Lots of stiff drinks. After that, Uriah would be so loose that he'd think, "What the heck? Bathsheba's home all by herself. I'm home. Why waste a good furlough?" Oh, yeah. That'll work.

Genius.

Just as before, though, David's genius idea didn't go as planned. Sure, Uriah stayed one more day and had a good old time. But he still didn't waver from his commitment to David and Israel and all of his fighting buddies. You see, Uriah was a good man to the core. So instead of going home to Bathsheba, he ended the night by staggering in to sleep it off with David's servants so that he could report back to his commanding officer the next day.

AAARRRRGGGHHH!!! Now what was David going to do? He's about out of time. Uriah was heading back to battle and he hadn't even laid eyes on Bathsheba, never mind laying down with her. Why wasn't this working? It shouldn't be this hard! OK, maybe now was the time for David to come clean. After all, Uriah seems to be a level-headed, sensible guy. Or maybe he wouldn't need to come clean. Maybe David could simply convince Uriah how lonely it is in the castle and Bathsheba looked like she could use some company...and, after all, David is the King. What better company could she keep? Yeah. That might work. Uriah would understand. Of course he would understand. He's just that kind of guy.

But what if he didn't? What if he didn't just say, "Hey, no problem, Dave." What if he got upset and word got around—what would happen then? What would people think? What would they say? What would happen next? Nope. David couldn't risk it. So he sat down, took pen and paper in hand, and wrote a letter to Joab—Uriah's commanding officer—instructing Joab to take Uriah out, put him in the middle of the worst fighting...and then abandon him. Leave him to die.

David wrote that note, folded it up, and handed it to Uriah in the morning saying, "Take this message to Joab." In other words, he handed Uriah his own death warrant. Nice. David was sure that Uriah wouldn't sneak a peek. And you know what? For once in this story, David was right. Uriah didn't so much as glance at the note. A few verses after this part of the story ends, we learn that Joab does exactly what he is instructed to do. Uriah is placed on the front lines of an intense battle. The rest of the troops pull back. And Uriah dies. He is killed. Dead.

Wow. This is an awful story. It's raw. Horrifying. Honestly, I don't remember learning it this way. I remember hearing this as more of a love story, thanks to the movies and a couple of preachers I've heard over the years. This has always been the story of David and Bathsheba. You know—the great love story of the Bible. In my mind, these two have always ranked right up there with Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Princess Grace and Prince Rainier. In the romantic version of this story, David is handsome, lonely guy and Bathsheba is a beautiful, lonely woman and their eyes meet at dusk across a...wall, I guess. I guess it would have been a wall. It was true love at first sight. What were they supposed to do? Fight destiny? David couldn't help himself...neither could she. Ahhhh. So romantic.

That's one popular explanation of what happened. There are others, too: there have been many sermons preached and stories spun to paint David out as the victim here. It's just

not his fault. This whole mess is Bathsheba's fault. She's a tramp. A hussy. A loose woman. She is evil. Manipulative. She knew exactly what she was doing bathing in that spot at that time of day—she'd had her eyes on David for a long time. Poor guy. Being King is a hard job, you know. The stress. The long hours. The expectations. And now he has to deal with women throwing themselves at him? What's a guy to do?

And how about that Uriah? If he really was such a loyal soldier, he would have followed the King's orders and gone home to sleep with his wife that first night back from the battlefield. But no. He had to be all pious and righteous and holier-than-thou, saying that it wasn't fair to the soldiers. If he'd just have done what he was told, he wouldn't have had to die. Poor, poor David. He has to make all the hard, unpopular decisions.

Let's set the record straight here: this is not a love story. It's not even remotely a love story. At most, it's a lust story. But even that's a stretch. David saw. David wanted. David took. It's that simple. And, yes, it's that violent. It is as raw and awful as it sounds. David took. He didn't ask. He didn't even 'fetch' Bathsheba, as the NRSV softly translates the original text. He took. And to even suggest that this is Bathsheba's doing is crazy talk. She was taking a bath. That's all. To say that she got what she deserved is wrong. Very wrong. Same goes for Uriah. He was a good man. A loyal, decent man. He did not deserve what happened to him in any way, shape or form.

Plain and simple, this is a story of power—of *perceived* power, that is. It's the story of an ego out of control. It's a story about what happens when people forget who they are and to whom they belong.

It's ugly. It is truly, truly awful. It's really tempting to skip this whole segment of the David story altogether, because let's face it—up until now, David has been a pretty good guy, for the most part. Sure, he's made some mistakes but overall? He's somebody I'd like to be.

Today, though, we discover that there's another side to David. He's a...jerk. A big jerk, to put it very, very mildly. OK, 'jerk isn't really the word I have in mind right now, but I can't tell you the word I'm thinking of for David right now as it would most certainly be bleeped off of the radio broadcast of this sermon. So for now, 'jerk' will have to do. He just doesn't seem to understand what "unconditional love" means. In last week's story, God told David that God would love him always, no matter what. But for some reason, David heard God's promise as an invitation to do whatever he wants. That's just being a jerk. And there are consequences for being a jerk. Even when you are beloved by God.

That's why we tell this part of the story. To remember that when we forget who we are and to whom we belong, there are consequences. Yes, God loves us no matter what. And we are forgiven. But there is a price to pay when we act like jerks.

As I said earlier, I love the stories of David because deep down, I have always wanted what David had. I have always wanted God to choose me to do something meaningful with my life. I have always wanted to think that the world is somehow a better place

when I share my gifts and my enthusiasm for life in ways big and small. And I've always wanted to believe that God is right here with me—just like God was with David.

The truth is, though, I don't have to want these things. They are already true. They are already real. I am a chosen. I am a loved child of God. So are you. And the world really is a whole lot better when we share ourselves in ways big and small. Heck, *we're* a whole lot better when we share what we have in ways big and small. I matter. You matter. And God *is* right here—just like God was with David.

But we forget. We forget that these things are true. And when we forget, we get in trouble. It all starts out so simple, with little things. They are nothing, really. Just a little something here and there—something that's all about me. No big deal. Honest. But pretty soon those little thing leads to other little things which lead to other little things and pretty soon you're so far down the road with all of those little things that you find yourself in a spot where you don't recognize where you are and you can't believe what all you've done and you have no idea what to do or where to turn next. That's being lost. Fallen.

But there is hope. Really. Unfortunately, I'm not going to get to tell you about that today. That's part of next week's story. Today's story began with a little thing (staying home from battle) and ended with a pretty big thing (murder). It might seem that the way things end up in this part of the story that David comes out smelling like a rose. Sure, Uriah died—there is that. But no one knows that David is the one responsible. No one knows what all went on behind the scenes. Well, that's not quite true. Some people know. But they aren't going to talk. It's all good, right?

Well, not really. It's not all good. You'll have to tune in next week to see what happens when David takes a good look in the mirror at who he is and what he's done. Will he like what he sees? What will he do next? What about Bathsheba? And what about the baby? What does God think about all this? Oh, the suspense. I won't tell you what happens but will offer you this teaser: a quote by Carlyle Marney, a quote that David Ruhe has said a time or two in his sermons as well:

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you flinch...and then it will make you free.”

Yes. Yes you shall. And yes it will. That's why we're here. Stay tuned...Amen.