

## Sermon: Seeing Ourselves in the Holy Train Wreck

Year B, Proper 12

[2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21](#)

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Today's reading is about a guy who made one bad call and then dug himself in deeper and deeper trying to cover it up. It's a story about adultery and betrayal and murder. It's a story that makes you wonder how it ever made it into the Bible. I'll ask John to read it once, from beginning to end, so we get the full sense of it. Then he and I are going to work together to explore all its rich nuances. Because if you ask me, "Cath, is the Bible really inspired by God?" today's train wreck is one of the passages I'd point you to to argue that it is.<sup>1</sup>

John, will you read 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 11:1-15?

*In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.*

*It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.'*

*So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'*

*So David sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house, and wash your feet.' Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.*

*When they told David, 'Uriah did not go down to his house', David said to Uriah, 'You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?' Uriah said to David, 'The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.' Then David said to Uriah, 'Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.' So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day.*

*On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 272.

*In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, 'Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.'*

So, there it is, adultery, betrayal and murder. It's not subtle. How many nuances can there be? We are talking about sin. We are talking about actions that separate us from the people God is calling us to be. We are talking about actions that we take to close the gap between us and God, a gap that only God can close. If we are talking about sin, there is always nuance, there is always more going on than we want anyone to notice. Let's take a look.

John, give us verse 1 again:

*In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.*

This whole story is going to be about King David. The shepherd boy who took a stone from the wadi and killed the champion of the powerful Philistines, Goliath, with a single shot. The shepherd king who led Israel as it transitioned from a nomadic people to a people settled on the land that God had given them. This whole story is about David, who put aside politics when the nation needed him to show them how to grieve at Saul's death. The warrior, poet king with whom God made covenant that he and his descendants would always sit on the throne of Israel.

Maybe we should read something in to the fact that Israel's warrior king is not on the battlefield with Joab and the rest of the army. It is certainly a powerful motivator for an army to have its king there. But there is a risk to having a king on the battlefield. Because if he is killed, the country can be plunged into a succession crisis. So, a wise king isn't at all the battles, just the ones that he needs to be at.<sup>2</sup>

I don't think we need to judge David for not being there. But if he had been there, this whole thing wouldn't have happened.<sup>3</sup>

John, how about verses 2 & 3

*It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite."*

The woman was very beautiful. The Hebrew for "very beautiful" is used very sparingly in the Old Testament. It's used for strikingly beautiful women,<sup>4</sup> women whose beauty changes the course of history. For David to realize that she is that kind of beautiful he has to be able to see her pretty well. She has to be close.<sup>5</sup> She has to be a neighbor. And Deuteronomy is pretty clear about not coveting your neighbor's wife.

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<sup>2</sup> Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1993): 249.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, "Was it Rape?: The David and Bathsheba Pericope Re-Examined." *Vetus Testamentum* 61, no. 1(2011): 7.

<sup>4</sup> Abasili, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Abasili, 7.

David doesn't know who she is. So her life and his life have run on separate tracks even though they're neighbors.<sup>6</sup> Bathsheba is one man's daughter and another man's wife. Standing in 2018, I may grimace at the idea of a woman being defined by whom she belongs to, since even back then, she belonged to her own self and to God. But the message to David is clear. Bathsheba is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah. She is *not* David's.

Verses 4 and 5

*So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."*

David *sent* messengers to *get* her, she *came* to him, and he *lay* with her. The verbs come thick and fast.<sup>7</sup> David didn't write her a poem, invite her to dinner, see if she was fulfilled in her marriage. David didn't court her. This doesn't seem to even be much of a seduction. It's almost clinical. David wanted what he wanted and he took action to get it.<sup>8</sup>

The part about purifying herself after her period makes it clear that she was not already pregnant with Uriah's child.<sup>9</sup> And it makes it clear that she was very fertile, more likely to get pregnant.<sup>10</sup>

When the text says *Then she returned to her house*, we may want to notice a couple of things. It isn't David sending her away, it also isn't David demanding that she stay with him in his new palace on the hill.<sup>11</sup> Bathsheba is taking herself back to her own life, to being Uriah's wife.<sup>12</sup> But then reality happens, and Bathsheba has to send a messenger to David.

Bathsheba's message *I am pregnant* arrives and David is no longer in charge of the situation.<sup>13</sup> He could have gone to besiege Rabbah with Joab and Uriah and the rest of the army. He could have looked out from the roof of his palace and admired the distant hills. He could have seen a beautiful woman, found out she was someone's wife and left her alone. He didn't do any of those things. He broke one of the laws from Mt. Sinai and there's evidence of it. David's a man of action, so he's going to try to get back into the life where he didn't lay with Bathsheba. But that life is gone because of the actions he took.

John, what does David do next, verses 6 to 9

*So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.*

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<sup>6</sup> Abasili, 8

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, 278.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, 278.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "Proper 12, Exegetical Perspective, 2 Samuel 11:1-15" in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 4.

<sup>10</sup> Abasili, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Garsiel, 256.

<sup>12</sup> Abasili, 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, 274.

If Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, is going to have a baby, David would really prefer that there was some way that Uriah could possibly be the father. Uriah has been away, fighting David's war for him.<sup>14</sup> So David sends word to Joab, the commander in the field, to send Uriah back to Jerusalem. Why not send for Uriah directly? Because if David is going to get back into the life where David didn't lie with Bathsheba, not only does David have to convince Uriah that the baby is his, David has to convince everyone else, the officers, all of Israel, that David had nothing to do with that baby. Plus, Joab is not only David's commander in the field; Joab is David's fixer.<sup>15</sup> Joab will do whatever it takes for David to get what he wants.

Naturally a king who is not in the field needs an update of how things are going in the battle. Uriah gives David the military update. Then David suggests Uriah goes home. In the Old Testament, talking about a man's feet can mean you're talking about his feet or you're talking about his private parts.<sup>16</sup> That's not the case in the New Testament. It's a Hebrew thing.

It would not be unusual for an officer, and Uriah was a member of an elite corps,<sup>17</sup> to give his report and then wash off the dirt and sweat of the journey, especially off his feet. But David really, really needs Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba, so the baby could be Uriah's. In this case, "feet" may have both meanings. Uriah is to take it literally; those of us hearing the story are to take it figuratively.

But Uriah doesn't go to his nearby house, doesn't sleep in his own bed with his own very beautiful wife.

John, why doesn't he, verses 10 – 12a

*When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day.*

One thing we know about Uriah is that he is a Hittite. He is a member of one of the tribes of people who were living near the land of Israel when the Israelites arrive and announced that they were taking over.<sup>18</sup> The Israelites fought with the Hittites for control of the land. So Uriah is not a child of Torah.<sup>19</sup> He is an outsider in their eyes. But *he* is obeying the laws of the God of Israel. He is keeping himself pure when he is fighting on behalf of the God of Israel and the King of Israel. Just in case we missed the contrast between him and David.

The other thing to notice here is the "they". *When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house."* David is tying himself in knots trying to maneuver Uriah into a position where he can be the father of the baby. But David isn't thinking. He has sent someone to find out who Bathsheba is. He has sent messengers to get her. She has sent to tell him "I am pregnant."

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, 275.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, 276.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, 274.

<sup>17</sup> Garsiel, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Robertson Farmer, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, 275.

There are a ton of servants and intermediaries who know perfectly well that David has something going on with Bathsheba.<sup>20</sup> But David doesn't see them. They don't exist. Because he still thinks he can re-route reality to the path where he didn't have anything going on with Bathsheba at all.

John, how about the rest of verse 12, then verse 13:

*On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.*

David is not drunk; Uriah is. But even drunk, he doesn't step next door and sleep at his own house. David is now working on another plan to re-route reality. David will get Uriah drunk and if Uriah goes to home to Bathsheba, great, mission accomplished. But if Uriah doesn't go home, there is now a blank space in the time line, where no one but David can account for Uriah's movement. That may be important if Uriah won't go down to his house.

John, Uriah didn't go down to his house, so what happens next? Verses 14 & 15

*In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."*

David sends Uriah back to the battlefield carrying his own death warrant. Here's the thing to notice. If Uriah dies on the battlefield, the baby can still be Uriah's.<sup>21</sup> Bathsheba can be a widow and there's that stretch of time where only David knows where Uriah was. Aside from that part of the reading when the verbs were flying thick and fast, *sent, get, came, lay* it doesn't appear that David really wants Bathsheba. David really wants the baby to be Uriah's because then David didn't break one the Big Ten Commandments.

But he did. Which brings me back to my argument that this train wreck of adultery, betrayal and murder is divinely inspired. Not the events. Those are purely human. But the including of this kind of tale in sacred texts. There is another version of the story of King David told in the books of Chronicles. It doesn't include this whole episode. For whatever reason, the editor of Chronicles didn't include it. If you asked me to write a story about the most amazing King of Israel, I wouldn't include it either.

Instead, this narrative tells us more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves.<sup>22</sup> Because we recognize starting out on our roofs in the cool of the evening and ending up writing a death warrant. Each step in and of itself is reasonable and not that big. But the path all those small steps take us on leads to destruction. We can say that we would never do what David did. But we have not had David's power, David's opportunities to turn the path of history. And until we have had that, we can't honestly say what we'd do. But we can recognize ourselves in his actions. Studies show that 1/3 to 3/4 of married Americans have cheated on their partners.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Garsiel, 257.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, 276.

<sup>22</sup> Brueggemann, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Anderson, "Five Myths about Cheating," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2012,

Thus we are told a story about a man with power far beyond anything we can imagine so we can see ourselves more clearly. And we are told that story with no judgment and almost no emotion. The authors of the text haven't added their take on the situation, aside from using Uriah's commitment to the laws of the God of Israel as a powerful contrast with David's. In a story of adultery, betrayal and murder, no one shouts or weeps or throws a vase at anyone. Clearly, these guys haven't learned the lessons of reality TV. Or perhaps they have. Because without demanding that we feel the emotions of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab, anybody, we can stay open to what happens next.

Before we explore what happens next, stay here for a moment. God is in relation with these people. These flawed, broken people who we recognize as ourselves. God is in relation with these people, not because there is no one better to be in relation with. Uriah is there and puts in a more kingly performance than David. But for all his flaws, because of all his flaws, David is the one God chooses to reveal God's relationship with. Absolutely, God is in relationship with Uriah. But it is harder to see it because Uriah has remained so faithful to God. With David, it is much easier to see God's intention to bring forth the Kingdom in the middle of all of our brokenness.

We'll return to this story next week. We'll see how it works out. No human acting on their own would have had the courage or the wisdom to include this story in a collection of sacred scriptures. If you want to see the Creator of the universe at work, look at those who think they can pretend to control reality. The true Controller of Reality remains in relationship with people as foolish and broken as we are.