

11 August 2024

How It Starts
2 Samuel 11:1-15

Our scripture today is from 2 Samuel, chapter 11, verses 1-15.

11 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.

2 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. 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' 4 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. 5 The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'

6 So David sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David. 7 When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. 8 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. 9 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. 10 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?' 11 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.' 12 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, 13 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.

14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. 15 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.'

Two weeks ago, we read the story of God's covenant with King David, from 2 Samuel 7. At that time, David, after many trials, had finally been crowned king of all Israel and had brought peace to the land. He wanted to build a temple to the Lord, but the Lord had sent the prophet Nathan to tell the king, "I don't need you to build me a house; instead, I will build a house for you, making your dynasty last forever." It was, by any reckoning, the high point of David's life. It was mostly downhill after that. By the end of his life, David had barely survived several rebellions, including a coup attempt by his oldest son, Absalom, who had actually captured Jerusalem and driven David out into the desert before the rebellion was put down. By the end, David was a broken man, manipulated by his wives and advisors, shivering at night and stewing over ancient resentments. What happened?

Well, it seems to have started with the passage you just heard, where ... well, let's not summarize it. Let's go back and read it through again, because I know of no passage that better illustrates how the Hebrew Bible tells a story – with few words but much meaning. We begin with verse 1: *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.* What do you notice there? It is spring – the time when spring rains make it possible for an army to find enough water in the semi-arid lands of Palestine – and so that's when kings lead their armies out to battle. And David ... doesn't. He sends his general Joab out, but he stays in Jerusalem. Okay, that's interesting. But not necessarily bad. After all, kings have more to do than go to war.

Verse 2: *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.* So, what royal business was David up to in Jerusalem while the army was off making war with the Ammonites? Late afternoon naps, apparently. On the roof. Now that part is normal. Can you imagine what it was like inside a mud-brick house in the middle of the afternoon? But set up a shelter for shade on the flat roof, where you can catch every breeze, and it's not so bad. At any rate, it made for better napping. And, you could see all over the city, which is how when he woke up and took a stroll, David got an eyeful. A beautiful woman, bathing.

You might not have noticed, but we've already seen David make two separate decisions: the decision to stay in Jerusalem instead of leading his army and the decision to catch some daytime winks on the roof. Small decisions, but life is made up of small decisions. Now he has another choice before him: having seen a beautiful woman in at least some state of undress, what does he do? He could look away, for instance, or he could stand there and lech. David chooses to call a servant over. "Who's that woman?"

"Oh, that's Bathsheba! She's the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of your mighty men who's off at the siege of Rabbah with Joab."

Now David has some important information. This woman is not just a hot chick. She has a name. She is someone's daughter, and she is someone's wife. In fact, she's the wife of a man David has fought beside, whom he would *still* be fighting beside if, you know, he had chosen to lead the troops himself. So what will David choose to do with this information? He chooses badly. Apparently what he heard was that her husband was out of town, so he sends servants to bring her to him, and he "lay with her."

A brief aside here. Male preachers for centuries have set out to lay the blame for this on Bathsheba, arguing that she was purposely bathing where she knew David would see her. The Bible doesn't say that, but I don't know. Maybe she was. I also don't care. Even if she was, that doesn't change David's guilt one whit. He still had choices. We still hear that argument sometimes: that some woman who was sexually assaulted brought it on herself by dressing immodestly. I find that insulting – the implication that we male human beings are such frothing, irrational, impulsive creatures that we cannot be held accountable for our own choices when we see a pretty woman. Bull. Suffice it to say that when the Bible finally assesses blame for this incident, it all goes to David.

After David "lay with" Bathsheba, the text adds an interesting parenthetical note: *(Now [Bathsheba] was purifying herself after her period.)* Huh. Why is that in there? Well, we find out

in the next verse: *The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'* With her husband away at war, and having just had her period, there is no question whose child this is. So now David has another choice to make – they're getting harder, aren't they? What is he going to do with this information? Once again David chooses badly. He decides on a cover-up. He sends word to Joab saying, "Send Uriah the Hittite back to me in Jerusalem." He figures if Uriah comes back, he will spend the night with his beautiful wife, and then no one will know that the child she bears isn't Uriah's. Perfect, right? Joab sends Uriah, who appears before David. David, sort of awkwardly, says, "So, how's the battle going? Oh. And you're all right? Good, good. Great. Well, that's it, really. Why don't you rest tonight in Jerusalem before going back? You have a home here? Good, good. And are you married? Great. Go see your wife."

But Uriah chooses not to go home. He sleeps all night in the yard outside David's house. The text doesn't tell us why, but Uriah does. When David hears the next morning that Uriah hadn't gone home, he knows the plan wouldn't work. Uriah would know the baby wasn't his. David says, "What's this I hear about you sleeping outside? What's that all about?" and Uriah answers, *'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.'* Two things to say about this speech. First, see? People can make honorable choices. This foreigner, Uriah the Hittite, did. And second, from David's perspective, Ouch! Because what Uriah chose not to do "eat and drink and lie with my wife while my comrades lie in the open field" is, coincidentally, exactly what David *had* chosen to do: he let his army lie in the open field, while he stayed at home to eat and drink and lie with Uriah's wife.

David tries again. He tells Uriah to stay one more night, and this time David gets him drunk before sending him home. But once again, Uriah sleeps outside, so now David has to make another choice. Either admit his sin and accept the consequences, or take extreme measures to cover it up. He chooses the latter. He sends a sealed note to Joab telling him to see to it that Uriah is killed in battle, and Joab, like the Mafia enforcer he was born to be, asks no questions but sees that it is done.

From that point on, David's life is one of the great tragedies of history and literature, a story retraced in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*, and even Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. It's not all depressing. God never takes back his covenant with David, because God doesn't do that, and next week, we'll look at the moment when David rose above his sin and was forgiven. But forgiveness does not mean escape from all consequences, and David does not. And, biblically, it all started here.

You know, I imagine a few months, or even a few days, before he saw Bathsheba bathing and chose badly if someone had asked David if he would ever issue a command to have one of his mighty men killed on the battlefield, he would have been outraged at the very thought. "I would *never* do that!" But he did. And the way he came to that was through a series of small decisions. And if, at any point along the way, David had chosen differently, that might have changed the trajectory of the rest of his life. But the farther along he got, the deeper in he felt, the worse the choices seemed, and the harder it was to choose what was right. This is how it starts. Addictions, embezzlement, extramarital affairs, corruption – these things don't start all at once, not usually. They begin with small decisions, because our lives are made up of small decisions.

But here's the good news. *The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.* Just as great tragedy begins small, so does the kingdom of God. Small choices are not only the foundation of tragic falls, but also of the work of God. This is the only thing that makes sense out of Jesus' ministry on earth. Again and again he passed up the opportunity to do something dramatic in favor of simply planting a few seeds in a few relatively unpromising disciples, but those small seeds grew into massive trees, those tiny deposits yielded huge dividends.

We do sometimes have to make large life decisions, but our lives consist of small ones. As far as the Kingdom of God goes, those are the ones that matter, because each of those is a tiny course change, which leads to other choices down the road. This week, notice the small choices. For better or worse, that's how it starts.