

Proper 12B: 26 July, 2009
2 Sam 11:1-15; Ps 14
Eph 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

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“Walk of Shame” the headlines proclaimed.¹ The story -- for once -- fully justified the extravagance. Mayors, rabbis, community leaders, organ donations, money-laundering, cereal boxes stuffed with cash—not one of which, may I add, made it to our food pantry! Corruption, it would seem, is all around us. My friends, if these allegations are substantiated, we may be the last honest people in the Garden State! These are headlines to trouble the sweet sleep of leaders, and yet, corruption is nothing new. If you think headlines are bad, take heart: at least your mistakes haven’t been committed to the pages of Scripture, for people to read about for three thousand years.

Because, of course, corruption is what today’s story about King David is all about. I told you, when we began the David cycle, that this was going to get ugly: well, ugly is here. Here we have the young king spying out his soldier’s wife while she is performing her religious duties, commanding her to come to his rooms, committing adultery, and then trying to cover up an unplanned pregnancy, first with subterfuge, then with murder. “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.” (2 Sam 11:15) It doesn’t get much more cold-blooded than that. With those words, David puts his own reputation ahead of the life of a blameless man, and of the law of his God.

And the authors of Scripture wrote it down, and the editors included it. I want you to pause for a moment and consider how remarkable that is, what it might say about the priorities of our God. If you read the chronicles of other ancient kingdoms, their monarchs are depicted as paragons of virtue. Errors are not mentioned. Defeats are not dwelled-upon. The portraits are air-brushed, and the kingdoms well-ordered places where every queen is strong, and every monarch is good-looking, and every prince is above-average.² The court-historians knew who buttered their bread, and their duty was to glorify their king.

And yet, David’s crimes are recorded. David, the greatest hero of Israel, the warrior-king, the one who is called “a man after God’s own heart” is portrayed in all his un-glory. We who read these words three thousand years later are shown his failings, his errors, his self-interest, his humbled atonement. This is a different kind of history.

It is not clear why the authors of the Bible chose that kind of honesty; they are long-dead, and we cannot ask them. But I think that Richard and Julia Wilke are on to something when they describe the Hebrews as a revealed and “revealing people.”³ An idealized portrait of a king reveals little. It sets the monarch apart from the rest of fallible humanity, accords him the status of a god. But a struggling king occupies the same space we do. He lives our own temptations, magnified by the opportunities which come with wealth and power, and so he reveals to us the desires and fears of our own hearts.

If God had wanted us to have counsels of perfection, the Bible would most likely have been a longer version of Leviticus or the Book of Proverbs, a list of rules and regulations spelling out how to live as disciples. The goal would have been pure submission; to be holy would be to obey. Instead, God gives us stories: the histories in the Hebrew Bible, the parables in the Greek one. Stories take us out of our own lives, invite us to a kind of creative empathy. We imagine ourselves in those halls of power. We wonder what Bathsheba thought when she was summoned before the

¹ *The Star-Ledger*, July 24, 2009.

² With apologies to Garrison Keillor, “A Prairie Home Companion.”

³ *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study*, p.8.

king. Did she go willingly? Did she submit to the king's advances for the chance to do her husband good? Was she forced? How did she feel at the end of this story, her husband dead, her body swollen with the child of his murderer? We think, and we wonder, and we return to our own lives changed, standing on feet that carry the dust on which Jesus walked.

If we go back through this story of David, we begin to see what went wrong in the first verse: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle,...David remained at Jerusalem." (2 Sam 11:1) This is the time when kings lead their armies; David is a king, but David stays at home. He has passed off his duties on his subordinates, and remained where he is not supposed to be: in safety, while other men risk their lives for him. David has committed the act which is at the root of almost all sin: he has set himself apart from other men.

Once he has learned to see himself as other, as different, as more important, his right understanding of himself falls away. He feels free to seize another man's wife, because he is, after all, the king. He feels free to try to deceive the other man about the pregnancy, calls Uriah home to lie with Bathsheba so that Uriah will assume the child is his own. He feels free to kill Uriah; reasons of state, after all, surely transcend mere human morality. After all, the portrait can always be air-brushed, can't it? Cut away the true perspective, and all the ground shifts and buckles as in a painting by Salvador Dali. Familiar landmarks lose their coherence, and all the world becomes strange.

But in the center of this warped world, there is a pillar of unbending righteousness. Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, is the perfect foil for David's ways. He is the virtuous warrior who is out on the battlefield, doing his duty as the king should. Called back from the front, he chooses to sleep with the guard in the hall, refusing to go to his own home. And when David questions him, he replies, "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." (2 Sam 11:11) Uriah refuses to be set apart from his fellow soldiers. If they are camping in the field, he will camp, too, even if he has to do it on the king's floor. If they are eating rough, so will he. If they are separated from their families, he will be, too, even if his wife is just a block away. In the face of the king's web of corruption and luxury and broken relationships, Uriah refuses to take part. He remains a *mensch*, a human being.

Jesus told a similar story, although we don't usually hear it that way. That's one of the things about stories: there is often more than one way to read them. It's the one about a nobleman who goes on a long journey, so he hands his servants a talent each, and tells them to trade with them until he returns. We all know how it ends: one makes ten talents, and another five, and each of these is commended. But the last servant buries his talent in the ground, and, when he is called to account for it, he replies, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." And the nobleman replies, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest." He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." (And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten pounds!') And again the king replies, 'I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'" (Luke 19:20-26)

We are accustomed, I think, to hearing this story as if the nobleman is God, and we are the servants. We are told to use our talents to make more, to bring forth fruit for God. We believe that if we do nothing with the gifts God has given us, God will be angry, and will take away even the little that we have. And this is a good reading. I've told it myself! It points us to much that is true.

But there is another way to read this story, coming out of Central America. Scholars down there noticed that the set-up bore a strong resemblance to actual historical events at the time of Jesus' childhood. When King Herod died, his son, Herod Archelaos, went to Rome for three years to be confirmed as ruler, and left Israel in the hands of viceroys. He instructed these men to collect the taxes in the same exploitative way as usual, so that Archelaos could become rich when he returned. In fact, he was so little esteemed that his subjects sent a petition to Rome asking that he be deposed, just like the nobleman's subjects in the parable, and Archelaos was.

If you read the story through the lens of that incident, the three servants come out looking a bit different. The two who made money are clearly the two who participated in extortion. The one who apparently failed, the one who calls his master to account for taking what he did not deposit and reaping what he did not sow, would be the one who refused to participate in oppression, who refused to become rich by inflicting misery.⁴ The tip-off comes in the nobleman's reply to the servant: *You should have put the money into the bank so I could have collected interest.* To us, that sounds utterly ordinary; we do it all the time. But taking interest on a loan was specifically forbidden by the law of God (Lev 25, Deut 23). It was called "usury," and was illegal even for Christians until 1215. And so the nobleman in the story is telling his servant that he should have committed sin in order to make money. And he punishes the servant for being upright, taking from him even the little that he has, just as David took from Uriah first his wife, then his very life. And when the people protest, *Lord, the other servant is already more than rich*, the nobleman's reply is chilling: *those who refuse to collude will suffer.*

This is the last parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke before he is led off to be crucified, and so those words hang in the air as his epitaph, this savior of ours who became poor for us: *from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* Jesus does not dispute that this is, too often, the way of the world. He simply demonstrates that some things are worth the cost: An upright conscience. Knowing that you have not tied weights onto the back of your fellow human beings. Refusing to be co-opted into acts of oppression, even if they are all around. Refusing to act as if you were better than your brother or your sister or your friend.

Christ never denies that there is a price to be paid for holiness. When the opponents of segregation gathered on that bridge in Selma, they knew they might not come back. When Col. Robert Shaw and the members of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry stormed the Confederate position in Charleston, they knew they would not come back. When the early Christians faced lions, when our fellow Christians in China suffer in prison, when young people choose careers with humanitarian agencies rather than the bonuses of the corporate world, they know the choice they are making, and the price they will pay. They are choosing not to stand apart.

And we, when we went into the waters of baptism, accepted that price. Those drops of water wash away our pretense that we are different, better, set apart from others. They are our profession that we need forgiveness, that we stand only by the power of grace, that we are called to be set alongside others, to live for the sake of God's little ones. When we say "yes" to Christ, we are saying "no" to a host of other forces: "to Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness which rebel against God, to the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, to the sinful desires which draw us from the love of God." (BCP, p.302) We are promising that we will refuse to do harm, even when the invitation is edged in gold, even when refusing it feels like cutting out our own heart. This is the way of the cross: to take up the burden of other people's pain, and not to add to it.

After Col. Shaw's death, his body was tipped into a common grave along with those of his soldiers. The Confederate officers saw this as an insult, partly because Shaw was an officer, buried

⁴ I found this interpretation (although not the link to usury) in Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*.

among enlisted men, partly because Shaw was white, and he was buried among black soldiers. But Shaw's father replied to them, "We can imagine no holier place than that in which he lies, among his brave and devoted followers, nor wish for him better company – what a body-guard he has!"⁵ Francis Shaw had it right. There is no holier place than among common men and women, because there is no other place where Jesus is more likely to be found. Seek him there, if you wish to find him. Amen.

⁵ Lorien Foote, *Seeking the One Great Remedy*, p.120.