

Sermon – Beyond Accountability
Scripture Lessons: II Samuel 11: 1-15, John 6:1-15
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Our first scripture reading, II Samuel 11: 1-15, is a powerful and pivotal passage in the life of David which has far reaching consequences for the King personally as well as the people he serves. The narrative is more than we want to know about this beloved King whose actions betray his faith, who misuses the power entrusted to him by Yahweh and conducts himself as if he has no one to whom he is accountable. David has withdrawn himself from his responsibility as King and from the community of soldiers who depend upon him. This is the word of God.

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 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. 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;^[a] 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." Amen.

Our second reading, John 6:1-15, introduces another time and place in our faith history as Jesus holds the disciples accountable for the nourishment of the community. Our reading recalls the miracle of "the feeding of the five thousand." This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels and a favorite among Christ's followers because it is a celebration of the community breaking bread together (reminiscent of the Eucharist in the early church) and a reminder that the same Yahweh who sent the manna in the wilderness for the Israelites came as "the bread of life." Hear now God's holy word.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.^[a] ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the

sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Six months' wages^[b] would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they^[c] sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Beyond Accountability"

The text: *"In the spring of the year, the time when Kings go out to battle. David remained at Jerusalem."* II Samuel 15:1 a & c

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, we are grateful for the stories of our faith which remind us of who we are and to whom we belong. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Today let us take a closer look at the story of David and Bathsheba through the lenses of theologians Walter Brueggeman and Marion Soards. Because the story is so well known, sometimes our familiarity becomes an obstacle to interpretation. This beautifully crafted biblical narrative is about much more than sexual desire. It is about complacency, spiritual stagnation, the misuse of power, and living as if one is beyond accountability.

On this sad and tragic occasion in the life of David, one cannot help but reminisce about that happy and heroic moment David accepted the challenge to fight Goliath, the first of many victories won by David. That is precisely why the words that introduce this narrative take the reader by surprise and reveal a deeper, spiritual reality; that something has gone array in the heart of David. *"In the spring of the year, the time when Kings go out to battle. David remained at Jerusalem."*

Holy war is not over for Israel. The Ammonites remain in the land, but apparently Holy war is over for David. In the security of his political power he sends Joab to wage holy war while he lounges in Jerusalem. David is no longer the chieftain. David is no longer the king requested by Israel who would "go out before us and fight our battles." We are not told when or how the change took place, but at some point David stopped doing what he did best. The healthy tension in his life that challenged him to use his gifts in leading God's people has been exchanged for an easiness and an idleness that led to his demise.

One might think that when David was told who this beautiful woman was that he desired, he would have cause for hesitation. "It was reported, "this is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the

wife of Uriah, the Hittite.” Bathsheba has no identity of her own in this time and culture. She is known only by the men to whom she belongs, one of whom is fighting a battle that belongs to David. Instead of hesitating, David acts quickly. The verbs reveal just how quickly. “He sent, he took, he lay.” “She returned, she conceived.” The verb that changed their lives is “she conceived.” The verb that best describes the encounter is “He took.”

It had been warned long ago by the Prophet Samuel that kings are takers. Until now, David had not been a taker. Everything was gladly given to him by Yahweh, by Jonathan, by Abigail, by his adoring followers – perhaps too much. Now David takes simply because he can.

When David receives word that Bathsheba is pregnant, he plots a cover up, sending for Uriah and encouraging him to go down and sleep with his wife. “Wash your feet” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The only problem is Uriah. He understands Holy war and refuses to have sex with his wife while Israel and his fellow soldiers are at risk. Walter Brueggeman writes:

“The incongruity between their risk and his comfort would be too great and would cause him to betray his very identity. The narrative portrays Uriah, quite in contrast to David, as a man of principle. Uriah’s words indict David. Uriah, the Hittite, a foreigner, is not even a child of the Torah. Yet, he is faithful as David once was. It is a stunning moment of disclosure and contrast.”

David could no more control the principled Uriah than he could control the pregnancy of Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. A desperate man, out of control, David sends Uriah, this holy warrior back to the battlefield carrying his own death order. This is a story about flagrant abuse of power. The shepherd boy who Samuel anointed, the brave young man who outwitted Goliath, the king who danced before the ark of the covenant in delight and gratitude has been reduced to an adulterer and a murderer.

This is a tragedy greater than we can bear, a tragedy that began with four simple words “*David remained in Jerusalem.*” When David stopped risking on behalf of his people, when David stopped risking alongside his fellow soldiers, David put himself and his spiritual well-being at risk. Whether it was a conscious decision or an unconscious process, at some point David abandoned God, the community of God, and the responsibility he was given within that community. He lives as if he were beyond accountability, as if there were no one to whom he had to answer for his actions.

This kind of autonomy, being a “law unto oneself” reflects an atheistic view of the world which sadly can be as subtle and widespread in those who profess faith as it is in those who do not. To do whatever one chooses without regard for how these actions affect the community, the neighborhood, or the society is to ignore God’s sovereignty and our responsibility as God’s children and stewards.

Today, as we are given the opportunity to look into the secret places in David’s heart, may we also look at our own hearts and the places where we have stopped risking and living accountable lives.

The good news about the Story of David and Bathsheba is that David was held accountable by someone in the community who cared enough to risk confronting him with his outrageous and arrogant behavior toward Bathsheba and Uriah. Yahweh sent the prophet Nathan and in the form of a parable, Nathan gave David the opportunity to see himself more clearly, to confess,

and to repent of his transgressions. Although David repented, he and Israel will never be the same again. There are consequences to the behavior that disregards human life and the covenants of God.

No matter when, no matter what, no matter why, may we never forget as beloved children of God that we are accountable for our behavior. We are accountable to the Triune God, the One who formed us in our mother's womb, the One who redeemed us on the cross and the One who sustains us for the living of these days. We are accountable to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to the stranger and the sojourner within our gates, and we are accountable to ourselves.

Let us open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to those who, by the grace of God, call us home when we begin to live as if we were beyond accountability. Thanks be to God. Amen.