

David - the Reprobate & Profligate

^{NRS} **2 Samuel 11:1-27** 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; 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." ¹⁶ As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷ The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well. ¹⁸ Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting; ¹⁹ and he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, ²⁰ then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? ²¹ Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.'" ²² So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. ²³ The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us, and came out against us in the field; but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. ²⁴ Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." ²⁵ David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it.' And encourage him." ²⁶ When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷ When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

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While we were on vacation, Cathy and I spent five or six days up in Burnsville in the Smoky Mountains. As we were leaving, we stopped to fill the car at a local gas station. When I reached for the hose I saw a Bible tract lying on a ledge on the pump. I glanced at it and tossed it in the car. It was a tract that's filled with historical mistakes, paranoia, conspiracy claims, hatred for vast portions of Christianity, and falsehoods – all designed to declare that all English translations of the Bible are heretical, except for the King James Version. In the process, the tract turns the King James translation of the Bible into an idol. It's such a temptation to make the Bible, any Bible, an idol. After all, a lot of Bibles have the words "Holy Bible" stamped right on the cover.

Calling it the "Holy Bible" may be a significant mistake. Let me explain. In the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, someone addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher." "Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good?"

No one is good but God alone.” (Mark 10:18 NRS) If no one is good except God, perhaps we should be even more reluctant to attach the word “holy” to anything or anybody except God. By calling scripture the Holy Bible, we're tempted to idolize the Bible. Also, we may unconsciously form expectations about the contents of the Bible. We may expect the people that we read about in the Bible to be clearly divided between the villainous disciples of Satan - and the pious people of God, those who speak in reverent and joyful tones, bringing truth, beauty, and God’s wonder-working power wherever they go.

The odd thing is, when we revere the Bible itself, we can weaken the power of scripture. When we see the people in the Bible as either evil or saintly, we turn the Bible into a caricature of reality. We can puff ourselves up by thinking, "At least I'm not evil like Joseph's mean brothers who sold him into slavery, or wicked like Queen Jezebel, or cruel like King Herod." That sort of comparison can quickly lead to self-righteousness. On the other hand, we can put other folks in the Bible up on such high pedestals that we despair of ever reaching such pinnacles of faith and devotion. After all, who among us would build a giant boat far away from water because we had a dream that there was going to be a flood? Who of us would wander all over Turkey and Greece for years, getting arrested, beaten, and flogged for our efforts like the apostle Paul? And the commands we read are so impossible to follow – don't be afraid, don't covet, love your enemies. And so, the Bible can seem to contain an unreal world with unreal expectations. It's a perfect world filled with people who are perfectly good – or perfectly evil ---- and we can't relate to it.

One of the great heroes of the Bible is King David. We know of him as a boy herding sheep, protecting the flock with his slingshot. We know of his bravery as he faced Goliath, the giant who had intimidated the entire army of Israel. We know of him as a great king who united the tribes of Israel into a single nation. We know of him as a musician and poet, who wrote some of the Psalms. David, we're told, was a man after God's own heart.¹ A man after God's own heart! It's hard to imagine higher praise than that! Surely that must be such perfection that none of us could ever come close to that ideal.

But, despite being a man after God's own heart, David was also a reprobate and a profligate. He was depraved and unprincipled. He was utterly and shamelessly immoral. There are many examples of this sort of behavior. When he was a young warrior, he paid the bridal price in order to marry one of King Saul's daughters. He killed one hundred of the enemy Philistines and brought their foreskins to King Saul.² It's a grisly and repulsive story, to say the least!

When David's son Absalom led a revolt to overthrow his father and become king in his place, David fled from Jerusalem, taking his family, servants, and government officials with him into exile. The only people he left behind were ten concubines to watch over his house. Absalom invaded Jerusalem and raped the ten concubines. When David retook the city, he placed the ten women under house arrest for the rest of their lives. He had left them in danger - and then punished them for having been abused. His treatment of these ten women was heartless and despicable.

There are other instances of shameful behavior by David. Perhaps the most glaring example is the story of Bathsheba. A few minutes ago, we heard a few verses from the beginning of this episode in David's life. David's army was off fighting the Ammonites and besieging one of their cities. King David had stayed in the capital city and one spring evening he was strolling on the palace roof when he saw a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of a nearby house. David liked what he saw and he made inquiries. She was Bathsheba, the wife of one of the soldiers in the King's army. David sent for her and had sex with her. Not only did he commit adultery, he slept with the wife of a soldier under his command and who was off in battle, and he abused his power as king by having her brought to him. The scriptures tell us that she had been performing the ritual bath that signified the end of her menstrual cycle. Perhaps David figured that this was a window in time where he might avoid getting her pregnant. A few weeks later she sent him word that she was indeed pregnant. And so, scripture warns us that the rhythm method of birth control is unreliable.

David wasn't repentant. Instead, he's cunning. He sent a message to the field commander of the army to send Bathsheba's husband, a Hittite named Uriah, to report to the palace. When Uriah arrived, David asked about how things were going with the military campaign, as if that was the reason he had sent for Uriah. Then he told his loyal soldier to go home and enjoy an evening of marital bliss. David thought that after having been away from home for a while, Uriah would be sure to go home and try to catch up on his conjugal pleasure with

his beautiful wife. Oh, David was conniving and clever! But Uriah never left the palace grounds that night because his comrades in arms were on the field of battle and he wouldn't violate his solidarity with them.

David became more cunning and insisted that Uriah eat at the palace the next night. He got Uriah drunk with the purpose of impairing his judgment. Surely if Uriah was drunk, he'd go see his wife. But again, while David was a man without honor, plotting as cleverly as he could to cover his tracks, Uriah remained a man of high honor and again slept on the palace grounds. David's scheme to make Uriah think that his wife's pregnancy was caused by conjugal bliss while on R & R had been foiled. King David's dishonor stands in stark contrast to the honor of a soldier in his army.

And so David spiraled further downward into depravity. He sent Uriah back to the front with a sealed message for the field commander. David sent instructions that Uriah was to be placed on the front line of battle and that they were to advance to the walls of the city where they were within range of the defending forces. Then the troops were to be pulled back, leaving Uriah even more exposed. David sent Uriah back into battle carrying his own death warrant. The plan worked and Uriah was killed. When he received word of Uriah's death, David sent a message back to the field commander saying, "Don't let this matter trouble you. People die in battle. It's just the way things are."

David violated three of the Ten Commandments. He coveted his neighbor's wife. He committed adultery. He killed a man as surely as if he personally had plunged a sword through Uriah's heart. He also violated the commandment in Leviticus to love one's neighbor as oneself. And he did all of this with cold hearted scheming and disregard for anyone but himself.

We have an unhealthy tendency to sanitize our heroes and think of them as two-dimensional paragons of virtue. It's simpler that way. It's uncomplicated and easy. But it's unreal. As a result, we see them as examples of lives that we can never live and our feelings of inadequacy and guilt increase.

Scripture is more realistic than we might like. We see that David was a man of many parts - and not all of them were admirable. The royal family was dysfunctional, with son against father, incest, adultery, and fighting between husband and wife. David's list of fine qualities is long, but his list of gross misbehavior is also long. And yet, David was a person who was in tune with the heart of God. That's hard to comprehend. But it's also reassuring that someone with such blatant faults was not shunned by God.

Through the years, in my work as a Stephen Minister, in my experiences in various congregations, and as I have come to reflect on the folks in my extended family and in Cathy's extended family, I've come to realize that all families have dysfunctional moments. Each family has things to be proud of - and things we'd like to hide. All of us are complex individuals, capable of both great behavior and despicable behavior. Thank goodness scripture reflects that complexity. The realistic honesty of the biblical stories can help us see ourselves in realistic and healthy ways. Each one of us has gifts and weaknesses. Each of us can be glad about our righteous moments and humbled by our unrighteous times. In seeing our neighbors clearly, we can avoid judgmentalism on the one hand and blind admiration on the other. And by seeing ourselves clearly, we can steer a course between overbearing guilt and sinful pride.

The scriptures are not holy, but they can make us whole. Amen.

¹ NRS **Acts 13:22** When he had removed him, he made David their king. In his testimony about him he said, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.'

^{NRS} **1 Samuel 13:13-14** Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you. The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, ¹⁴ but now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

² **1 Samuel 18:17-29**