

The 10th Sunday after Pentecost
July 29, 2018
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

In recent weeks, we've been working our way through Mark's gospel. But this morning, we interrupt our regularly-scheduled readings from Mark for a special five-part series of readings from the sixth chapter of John. It's a bit confounding to me. After all, we skipped Mark's account of Jesus feeding a vast crowd and of Jesus walking on the water last week. Then, this week, we hear John's version instead.

As a preacher, I'd like to unpack all of that – there's a lot I could do with all that.

But I'm not going to say very much about this morning's gospel for at least two reasons. In the first place, the gospel over the next four weeks, all from the sixth chapter of John, will unpack what we began here this morning. And that's going to be a wonderful opportunity for you to hear different preachers offer some varied reflections on this common theme.

And in the second place ... David and Bathsheba.

I'm a bit uneasy doing so. I worry about a few things. I worry about "mansplaining" it to you. I worry that the sordid details may feel unseemly and, accordingly, feel inappropriate for Sunday morning. And I worry it all hits too close to home for some here this morning.

But here it is. And here we are. And I am going to speak about that story from II Samuel this morning because, most of all, I worry that we would read this story in church on a Sunday morning then go on without comment, hoping nobody would notice.

So ... the first thing I want to say is that this is a horrific story. In her comments about this passage, Baptist minister and writer Katey Zeh says: "Let me start by calling this story exactly what it is. This is a story about rape." She says "it's a biblical '#metoo' story."ⁱ

"Rape" is not a word I say lightly here this morning, and I don't plan to repeat it. But I don't think there's any way to take this story seriously if we aren't clear about the kind of story it is.

If we made it into a movie, it'd couldn't be a family film, something rated PG-13. No, it would have to be the sort of thing HBO does so well – something like *Big Little Lies* or *Game of Thrones* – something full of intrigue and deceit and violence and betrayal.

And it's not a misguided romance. It's not a "mistake" that David made. It's not an "indiscretion." It's a violation and an abuse.

We have training in the church designed to keep people safe. We have the training because clergy, in particular, have abused their positions of authority and abused people, particularly women and children. And in that training, we talk about power and inappropriate behavior and boundaries.

I don't even initiate "friend" requests on Facebook, because I understand that because of the perception of unequal power and status in our relationships, it could be awkward for some parishioners to feel they can decline that request.

And if that's true between me and a parishioner on Facebook, this story about a king and a woman alone and on her own is all the more fraught. This isn't conceivably a consensual relationship, not when there's no way Bathsheba could withhold consent.

And to be clear, Bathsheba is in no way culpable or complicit in what happens to her. The way the story is sometimes told, she was doing something wrong. She was too beautiful or too provocative. She should have been more modest. She should have bathed inside rather than be out at the moment David spied her. In other words, she did something to bring this on herself. It's a classic example of victim-blaming. And that's not what the story says. In fact, Bathsheba is in her right place as the story is told, having a ritual bath required after her period. ⁱⁱ

No, Bathsheba does nothing wrong. And she's not in the wrong place at the wrong time. That would be David. He's the one who is not where he's supposed to be. "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle ..." That's how the story begins. But King David hasn't gone out to battle. He sent Joab and everyone else off to do that. He stayed behind, enjoying the comforts of his palace, and lounged upon his couch.

Indeed, David seems very comfortable sending others off to do his dirty work. He sends soldiers off to war. He sends servants off to inquire about this woman he spies as she attends to her private duties. After learning that she is someone's daughter, someone's wife, he sends "messengers to get her."

Again, there's nothing romantic about what happens next. And it's not somehow less egregious because this all happened in "another time." David deserves no slack, as if saying "kings will be kings" makes it more or less an everyday offense.

No, it's a vile and despicable thing that David has done. He knows it. That's why he schemes so desperately to keep it all under wraps.

This could be a movie. But David wouldn't be cast as a sympathetic figure. David's a schemer, sending more people to do more of his dirty work. He sends word to his general, telling him to send Uriah back to him. Then David sends Uriah home, expecting him to "wash his feet" and clean up the mess David has made.

Indeed, the more David schemes his evil schemes, the more noble and heroic Uriah comes across. David is content to enjoy his palace far from the battlefield, but Uriah will not enjoy any comforts, neither the comforts of his wife nor even of his own bed, not while others are encamped on a battlefield. Even when David intentionally gets him drunk, Uriah remains principled and true.

So David sends orders, carried by Uriah himself, for Uriah to be killed.

It's hard to find any "good news" in such a sordid tale of lust and violation and betrayal and violence.

Even so ... maybe, just maybe there are one or two "slivers" of good news.

The first sliver of good news may be Bathsheba. She is so horribly treated in the telling of this tale – and even in death, she has not always been treated gently. She deserves better.

She deserves to be seen, first of all, not overlooked as collateral damage. She deserves justice and our compassion.

She deserves to be seen, not ignored ... and she deserves to be seen as more than a victim. She survives, even thrives in the end. We don't read that part of her story, but she sticks around and gains prominence in the royal household. In time, she has a second child. They'll call him Solomon. And though he was a younger son among David's heirs, Bathsheba secures David's throne for him when David dies.

The second sliver of good news God's judgment. We don't like to talk about judgment. But it strikes me as good news, indeed, that God is not indifferent here. Though David was the chosen one of God, God judges David ... and God judges him severely. (Come back next week to hear how Nathan the prophet takes David the king to task.)

And apart from that word of condemnation, this really is the beginning of the end for David and all that he had accomplished. It all goes wrong for him from here. One of his sons will repeat David's crime against a half-sister. Her brother will seek vengeance and kill him. And before long, the kingdom which David had pulled together will begin to unravel until everything comes all undone.

Our Psalm this morning is a hard word of judgment in its own right. The opening line about fools who say, "There is no God." is not critical of atheists. It's a harsh criticism of fools who live as if there's no guiding value system, as if there will be no accountability for the things we do in this life. It's a lament that there are corrupt and powerful people in this world who take from whomever they please, thinking the rules that apply to everyone else do not apply to them; they take their pound of flesh, they chew people up. They are powerful people without compassion "who eat ... people like bread."

I've said nothing about this morning's gospel, but there is one more sliver of good news there, as well. It's not in the feeding of the thousands or in Jesus walking on the water. It's in the space between the two miracles.

After Jesus provides food for the people, they try to make him their king. The people don't remember Samuel's cautionary words of old, telling them that kings are a bad idea, that kings will take their sons to fight their wars and take their daughters for their harems. The people don't remember this morning's cautionary tale about King David. The people don't remember the cautionary reality of their life under Caesar and his vassal kings. The people forget all that. They want Jesus to be their king.

But Jesus is determined not to be a king. That's not what the people need.

The point goes far beyond this morning reading, but Jesus of course never set out to rule over us. Rather, he comes to love us and to show us what life is supposed to look like when we sit down to eat together. And especially in times when there are those who think the rules don't apply to everyone equally, that's a rather large sliver of good news in the end.

ⁱ Katey Zeh, guest on Pulpit Fiction podcast 281 (for July 29, 2018) @ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper12b>.

ⁱⁱ Gennifer Benjamin Brooks @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3725.