

I recently heard someone say that if half your congregation is thinking about something, you should preach about it. That spurred my thinking as I considered the fact that we are in a political season.

With an election in a little over three months away, I assume you have at least thought about it a bit. I won't ask for a show of hands to see if, in fact, half of you are thinking about our current political situation, because if that's not the case, I don't have a backup sermon this morning!

Now lest you think I'm going to do a deep dive into politics, fear not! I'm not going to examine the current political situation or tell you how to vote.

But I am called to tell you what the Bible has to say about power and its proper use. I'm here to help us think about God's ways, God's followers, and God's commandments. This is the lectionary text for today, and I think we should take a look, in part because in some circles, David's name has been invoked as justification for certain behaviors. And if you haven't heard that, no worries. The David story still holds great instruction for today. Sound good? Oh also, warning, this is at the very least and PG-13 story, possibly not suitable for young ears. . . !

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Before we begin a close examination of the story. I want to point out what may be the most fascinating and surprising part of this story: *that it's in the Bible at*

all. I mean think about it–if this story of how badly the greatest of all of Biblical Israel’s kings messed up, behaved horribly, and committed all manner of sin, wasn’t in the Bible, would we miss it?

Probably not. You see, generally speaking, people try to make themselves and their groups look good, talk about how great they are, and how terrible others are, how terrible their enemies are. I do it. Guessing you maybe do too. And that’s why we need to be reminded of our shortcomings as we confess them, confess our sin at the beginning of every service.

So we need to note that this is a story written by Israelites for Israelites, and what it shows us is that the writer,

and the people of Israel

who affirmed this story as being part of the sacred text,
are open to the hardest criticism of all: *self-criticism*.

It’s easy to criticize others.

It takes a sobering and almost herculean effort to criticize ourselves
and our tribe.

And of course, this virtuous and upright behavior is not only here in the OT,

But also Jesus’s strongest criticisms were for his own branch of Judaism,
the Pharisees.

To those outside of Jesus’s group,

he was always accepting, comforting, and inclusive.

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Turning the story. It begins with a giant “uh-oh.” . . . !

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab. . . Why is this? At the very least, David is *coasting*. At worst, he is irresponsibly shirking his duties as the King of Israel. He seems to be apathetic. “Why should I

risk myself when I can risk the lives of others.” As with many rulers before and since, it’s easy for old men to send young men (and now women) into battle.

Furthermore, it is quite a far cry from the young boy who did not think twice about confronting, *mano a mano*, the giant Goliath.

And lest we think David had other important State matters to tend to, we read that he *gets up off his couch – in the middle of the afternoon!* I guess he’s taking a break from watching Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy.

It seems he has been enjoying a life of leisure with nothing better to do than take a stroll around the palace, and then, looking down from his palace high above the city, he saw a woman bathing on her rooftop, and she was a beautiful woman bathing on her rooftop.

And David *covets*. Quite literally he covets his neighbors wife. Ring any bells? Remember the tenth commandment? *Thall shalt not covet anything of your neighbors, and certainly not his wife!*¹ *One commandment down, it seems, nine to go.*

Such is David’s curiosity, then, that he does what a person coveting does, he performs the ancient equivalent of a Google search—he sends someone to her house to get more information about her.

I’d like to see how this went down. . . a knock at the door, an emissary of the king, a question, “oh hi, say, the king is wondering who you are.”

What is Bathsheba thinking? He husband is off at war, a government official knocking on the door usually is usually the bearer of the the bad news that her husband has died in battle. But no, this is an official inquiry into who she is. Is it some king of census? It’s very weird whatever it is!

If you think about David sending someone to find out who she is without some official reason, it really is a false inquiry, isn’t it? I mean, I doubt the messenger said, “Hi there, the king saw you bathing and is really lusting after you

¹ The 10th commandment is unique in that it deals with what we *think*, not what we *do*, the focus of the other 9 commandments.

and wants to know who you are.” And doesn’t false witness ring a bell? The ninth commandment, “ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” *Two down, eight to go. . .*

And the messenger brings the info back to David that the bathing woman is “Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.”

Names in biblical Israel are full of meaning and instruct us in our understanding of these stories, and Bathsheba and Uriah’s names could not be more different, for the meanings of Bathsheba’s name is as vague as the meaning of Uruah’s name is specific

In essence, Bathsheba has no name because her name literally means “daughter of Sheba,” *Bat* is Hebrew for daughter, and Sheba is some unknown man. And the text further obfuscates Bathsheba’s identity by saying explicitly that she is the *daughter of Eliam!*² So who is she really? She’s kind of an enigma.

But the text clearly tells us who her husband, Uriah, is. Uriah is a Hittite, a hated enemy of Israel. Thus, he is either a convert or mercenary. But the meaning of his name is a lightening bolt in the story. His name remarkably means “yahweh is my light.” “God is my light.” As honorable of a name as you can get. And we will see that he is imminently worthy of his name.

Furthermore, we know that Uriah is a member of “David's Mighty Men,” 37 of David’s best warriors. 37 of those closest to David in battle and in life. This is why Uriah and Bathsheba’s house is so close to the palace—Uriah wasn’t just some soldier, he was in David’s cabinet so to speak.

And so knowing, as David surely does, that Bathsheba is the wife of one of his close advisors and warriors, what does David do?

“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.”

² Eliam (is it the same Eliam?) appears in the list of David’s Mighty men.

Remember the 8th commandment, “Thou shalt not STEAL.” David takes what isn’t his. David breaks the 8th commandment. *Three down, seven to go . . .*

And then David “lay with her,” violating Bathsheba, and the 7th commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” *Four down, six to go . . .*

And David isn’t done with his deviousness and destruction.

David learns that Bathsheba is pregnant, and the reader knows it’s definitely David’s child because we are told about Bathsheba’s menstrual cycle.

So David immediately sets out to *cover his tracks*. He brings Uriah home from the battlefield for some rest and relaxation, assuming Uriah will go home and sleep with his wife. He doesn’t. He’s loyal to the king, loyal to his fellow soldiers, and loyal to God. David gets him drunk, and even drunk,

Uriah behaves better than David, who is sober!

Uriah is as faithful to God and God’s law as David is unfaithful!

Notice that Uriah points out that the Ark of the Covenant is with the troops out in the field. Remember what’s in the Ark? Yes, the 10 Commandments. Does the allusion to the 10 commandments slow David down? No. Not at all.

Instead of being reminded of who he serves and what God requires of him, he plots to kill Uriah, to cover his sinful tracks. It’s called “murder by proxy.” Getting someone else to do the killing makes you no less culpable than doing the killing yourself.

And he sends the orders for Uriah’s murder in a letter that Uriah carries to Joab! Uriah carries his own death sentence.

Do you think he knows?

I think Uriah does know. Such is his character that he faces death rather than compromise his loyalty to God and God’s ways. It’s reminiscent of Jesus bearing his cross to Golgotha. He knows that loyalty to God will cost him his life.

And David breaks the 6th commandment: Thou shalt not murder. *Five down, five to go. . .*

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So what can we learn from the first half of the story of David and Bathsheba? Well, we see a king behaving very badly. A king who is supposed to model what it means to follow God. A king, whose name means “beloved by God,” behaves in entirely selfish, self-centered, uncaring, and murderous ways.

He takes what he wants. He does as he pleases, he rapes and murders. The greatest of all of biblical Israel kings fails,
just like we know that we too, can behave in selfish and self-centered ways,
but hopefully without as severe consequences in this story.

But spoiler alert, in case you aren’t here in four weeks when we see the conclusion of the story.

Just because David does, it doesn’t make it right. As the story unfolds, you see that *no one, not even David, is above God’s law.*

And in the words that begin the second half of the story,
God was displeased.

And to his credit, David, albeit eventually, does see the error of his ways, and he does repent.

If David is to be lifted up and some kind of example, it surely is not for his commandment-breaking behavior,
but for the fact that he *repents*.

If you want to hear his repentance, you can read Psalm 51,
where he bewails his sin which is ever before him.

And he begs God for forgiveness
and whatever else the Christian faith is, it's repentance and forgiveness.

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In our Lutheran tradition, we understand ourselves to be forgiven by God already and therefore, we are able to act in the world in the imitation of Christ to love our neighbor.

So may we go this week guarding against all forms of selfish, self-centered behavior that is outside the wheel of God.

May we, like Uriah, stand tall and straight, and morally upright
so that "God is our light."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.