

“*Seeing Sin*”

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:25 (NRSV)

A priest was visiting with a church member and asked, “*How’s your relationship with God?*” The church member answered without thinking about it too much, “*Well, I like sinning. God likes forgiving. We’re get along just fine.*”

Have you heard this joke before? It’s actually an adaptation of some lines from W. H. Auden’s poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. In Auden’s poem King Herod says, “*I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.*”

We all like the “admirably arranged” world Auden describes. It’s comfortable. It’s easy. It doesn’t ask much of us. I can make my apology to you when I’ve done something wrong or hurtful, offer a quick “Please forgive me,” and go on about life business as usual. I get to do what I like (sin) and God gets to do what God likes (forgive).

It sounds trite but sometimes our lives and our faith actually look and sound like Auden’s “admirably arranged” world. The problem with an “admirably arranged” world is that wounds aren’t healed. Relationships are not put back together. Lives are not transformed. Nothing really changes.¹ Too often we settle for an “admirably arranged” world instead of doing the hard, messy, complex redemptive work of confession, repentance, and reconciliation. And it is hard work. And actually, when it comes to sin, there is nothing admirable about it all. It is not only *not* admirable; it is all out abhorrent at times.

This week we continue to sit with the discomfort, injustice, and pain of the abhorrent crimes of King David: the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. David covers up one sin with another... spiraling downward into what is his lowest moment as a human being, let alone as a king and leader.

¹ Everything up until this point comes from: Michael K. Marsh, “No More Admirably Arranged Lives – A Sermon on Romans 6:12-23,” *Interrupting the Silence* (29 June

2014), accessed on August 5, 2018 at <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/06/29/no-more-admirably-arranged-lives-a-sermon-on-romans-612-23/>.

There are many reasons why this story is unsettling, and in last week's sermon Pastor Alice unpacked the power of power, and how David's unchecked power led him to abuse, harm, and take advantage of those who were supposedly in his care as king and military leader.

I wish this story was over last week. But it's not. And those who created the lectionary – the texts assigned to each Sunday that many Christians all over the world follow – must have known that putting this all in one week was too much, and that skipping some of it wasn't even a possibility. This moment in David's life forces us to see the lives of those he harmed. We see Bathsheba's pain, and her child's pain and eventually the pain that would befall David and his family. No one can deny the sin in this passage...the sins that David consciously committed *and* the sins that spiraled out of control as a result.

It's true what reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "*All human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions.*"² The intentions of our

sins temporarily serve our own ego and power; while the consequences of our sin often permanently sever lives and relationships.

One of the reasons I think sitting with 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12 is so important is because these are King David's sins we are talking about. "*Remember who David is: the faithful shepherd boy in the fields, the singer of psalms, the anointed king, the favored one of God, the hope of Israel, and, in Christian accounts, the defining ancestor of Jesus.*"³ Literally in 1 Samuel 13:14 David is described as "*a man after God's own heart.*"

If this is true, then acknowledging the abhorrent sins of King David threatens a whole worldview of ours. It shatters a vision in which saints and sinners can be neatly divided, a vision in which God works through the good actions of good people to establish peace and justice. If David sinned, then the world is not like we thought it was. [This story] pushes us beyond the polarities of "good guys and bad guys" that often order our thinking. It remembers David as murderer, adulterer, and

² Quote accessed on August 5, 2018 at http://www.softpanorama.org/Skeptics/Quotes/reinhold_niebuhr.shtml.

³ Ted A. Smith, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a," *Working Preacher* (2 August 2009), accessed on August 5,

2018 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=355.

predatory king *as well as* hero, beloved of God, and singer of psalms.”⁴ All of these things are true, even while some of them are admirable and other abhorrent.

While *our* sins are different, the truth is, we are all like David: a mix of sinner and saint and all the stuff in between. We sin and lust for power...*and* we love and worship God. We sin and harm others...*and* we love and help others...sometimes even our enemies. We sin and disparage ourselves...*and* we love and forgive ourselves, sometimes even as much as our neighbors.

We are complicated, aren't we? If this passage is uncomfortable to read, then it merely reflects how uncomfortable we feel when we realize that our “goodness” cannot save us...and that whatever David has in him to make him harm others, we have that capability within ourselves too. Yikes!

But we don't like to see this in ourselves or admit we are wrong to others. We like to push things under the rug and move on, even when we know we messed up. And we can't understand why others won't move on with us!

But whether we see it or admit it, our sins have lasting effects, and the verse that pivots us from the sins of David in chapter 11 to the recognition of and consequences of those sins in chapter 12 is: “*But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord,*” (11:27b). When we hurt others, God hurts too.

So, what is this “thing” that David did? (or things?!) Well, Bathsheba is grieving the loss of her husband and during her time of mourning, David sends for her and makes her his wife, and the text says, “she bore him a son,” (11:27a).

Everything in that sentence is about David getting what David wants. Regardless of Bathsheba's love for her Uriah (her husband) – and regardless of her pain from being raped by David – David assumes she wants to marry him now that she's carrying David's child – OR he just doesn't care what she wants and just takes her for himself to save face. We don't know because Bathsheba's voice is silenced in this text. But her tears are not. Her tears speak. And while David may not hear the pain in her tears, God does.

At this point in the story, David is saying, “Whew!” and wiping his brow. It appears as if he's gotten

⁴ Smith, *ibid.*

away with it all...like he can breathe a sigh of relief. But God is displeased. God has not forgotten David's sins, even if God will eventually forgive them. In some way, I think God's displeasure is a way of acknowledging and hearing Bathsheba's voice in this whole story. And it's notable that the *first* time God is mentioned in all of chapter 11 is in this last verse. It's indicative of where David's heart was during this whole sin-filled scheme...not with God. With himself and his own desires.

But even though God wasn't on David's mind, David was on God's mind. Right after we learn that God is displeased with David we learn that God sends Nathan to him. (If this was a movie, we'd cue the scary music change right here! *Humming theme song to Jaws...*)

We don't know how much time had passed since the end of the previous chapter, but when the prophet Nathan arrives on David's doorstep, Nathan confronts King David, as only a biblical prophet can do!⁵

In order to get the King to admit what he had done, Nathan uses a

smart tactic: he tells a story. He paints a compelling picture of a poor man who had just one little lamb who he treated and loved like a child, only to have a rich man who had tons of his own lambs come by and take the poor man's lamb in order to kill it and serve up a meal to his dinner guests. When David, finally displays some hint of moral fiber, and replies in outrage about this injustice, Nathan responds with the famous words: "*You are the man!*" (12:7). In dramatic fashion, Nathan uncovers the injustice Bathsheba and Uriah both suffered.⁶ And it's a "gotcha moment" for David. In seeing someone else's sin, he didn't know he'd be revealing his own.

Now Nathan says that the violence David committed will be returned upon him: the sword of his enemies will be against him and his wives will be taken from him. And this proclamation of punishment ends with David's confessing that he had indeed sinned against God (2 Samuel 12:13).

Given all that has happened in chapter 11 to cover up his sin, David's confession is quite surprising...and refreshing, isn't

⁵ Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15," *Working Preacher* (12 June 2016), accessed on August 5, 2018 at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2861.

⁶ Claassens, *ibid.*

it? David who finds himself in a most powerful position could easily have silenced the voices of dissent around him -- potentially even resorting to killing Nathan in order to ensure his sins go unseen. After all, leaders all too often insulate themselves from critical voices which inevitably create circumstances rich for injustice. So, the fact that David admits that he was wrong shows some sense of morality, even though his confession focuses on his sin against God with no mention of his actions against Uriah and Bathsheba.⁷

David was blind to the damage he had already done. You can't just cover up the evidence of your sins, because their consequences live on in others. No sin is ever merely personal. No sin is truly only an offense against God. Our sin always impinges upon the lives of others. That is the very essence of sin and precisely what makes forgiveness so difficult to experience. Sin is not just separation from God; it separates us from others.

⁷ Claassens, *ibid.*

⁸ In this passage, Nathan emerges as an incredibly courageous prophet speaking truth to power and doing so in a quite clever fashion using imagination to draw the king into judging himself. The language used for the rich man taking the lamb is the same language that was used in 2 Samuel 11:4 when David took Bathsheba. And, the verb "to take" is the language that is used in 1 Samuel 8:11-19 by the prophet Samuel when he warns the people about the dangers

And so all this said, while it seems that we are on our way to wrapping this text up (albeit not with a neat little bow) because Nathan confronts King David⁸ and David confesses to his sin... things all the sudden get more complicated when a curveball is thrown and Nathan promises David that *he* will not die, however *his son* will. And this curveball is supposedly thrown by God.

This troublesome proclamation reflects the biblical idea that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the sons -- literally in this case. How is this fair? Well, it's not fair. Or just. But we have to remember that the biblical authors were human and even though they were inspired, they were susceptible to our limited human understanding and our desire to rationalize and explain everything. We humans try to justify all kinds of things, and perhaps the small child was ill already and it caused the people around David to wonder why... and Nathan, knowing what David had done, made the connection to his sin. Maybe it was all the people

of the royal office. Kings take whatever they want. In the context of leaders abusing their power, one truly needs whistle blowers and other upright individuals who stand up and say "No!" to injustice and the abuse of power. No leader is immune to this. Nathan emerges as a humble hero in his passage... akin to those male allies of the #metoo movement today... raising voices and awareness for injustices that have been long, long overlooked and hushed over. (Claassens, *ibid.*)

asking, “*Why would this baby become sick and die?*” that made Nathan proclaim for God that it was because of the abhorrent things David had done. This fits the theology of the day, and how people understood God to work in the world.

Today, many of us might challenge this direct association between sin and suffering. Because such religious views, even though forming a distinct part of this biblical text as well as many others, is deeply problematic when children today get sick and die. In this regard, it is significant that, in the rest of 2 Samuel 12, David is shown to fast and pray for the life of his child.⁹

Because even though David confessed his sin and prayed, his son still died. Prayer and confession did not save this baby boy. So the correlation between “sin and suffering” and “prayer and saving” really breaks down.

Does sin cause suffering? Always. Our actions have consequences. But it’s not so easy to parse out just how those consequences unfold. We can be quick to play God and explain away suffering by pointing to sin. But the whole

message of Jesus is that he came to correct that correlation and to show us that Love and Grace are God’s answers to our sin.

But our sin, even when forgiven, still hurts. And we must sit with the sadness and confusion of why this innocent child died is important. We don’t know why. This child’s life was lost and we don’t know what kind of impact he would have had on the world...what he would have been when he grew up, or what he would have been talented at and gifted with. It is a loss that, much like Bathsheba’s tears, speaks volumes.¹⁰ And the second child that David and Bathsheba have, Solomon, certainly does not replace this first child. That grief remains.

A key take away for us in this passage is that David did have regrets. He confessed and he mourned and fasted and prayed. This is really important. David *saw* his sin.

It is always easier for us to see the plank or log in someone else’s eye, as Jesus said, than it is our own, isn’t it? Just as David did with Nathan’s story. It was so clear to David in that story who

⁹ Claassens, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Why this child died is a mystery. What is not a mystery is that David’s sins had consequences. He hurt and harmed

people who he did not even intend to hurt and harm...like all his wives who were taken from him and given to some other man to sleep with.

was right and who was wrong. That parable finally allowed David to see just how outlandishly obvious his sins were...just how much he had abused his power and wealth and kingship. It was the kind of lightbulb moment that you hate having, right? Where right as the words are coming out of your mouth, you realize you're saying or doing the very thing you hate that other people say or do? We all have these moments. Like when we complain about how much we hate people that complain?

The thing is, when we are focused on pointing out someone else's behavior we can't see ours as clearly.

I shared with my colleagues this morning that I was really struggling to figure out the point of this sermon. (Confessional moment between preacher and congregation!) But perhaps the point is for David's story to be for us what Nathan's story is for David. A chance to examine our lives. And see things that we can't see on our own. When is the last time you really thought about S-I-N? Really thought about your actions and the intentions and motivations behind them?

"This story breaks up the stories we tend to tell about others and

ourselves, stories in which we are either good enough -- not perfect, but good enough -- that we have no real need of grace, OR that we are so bad that we are beyond the scope of grace." Neither is true.

What is true is this: God's grace is for all. It's here for us when we realize we've messed up, and it's here for us when we've been hurt by someone else who messed up.

In his book, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, Father Richard Rohr writes, *"The most amazing fact about Jesus, unlike almost any other religious founder, is that he found God in disorder and [messiness and] imperfection—and told us that we must do the same or we would never be content on this earth."*

In all the chaos and messiness and hurt and harm of sin, when we can see sin and name it, then we can begin to unravel its power on our lives. Sin is sneaky. It seeps into our souls and pretends like it's supposed to be there. (Just think of David! He thought he could have Bathsheba...like it was the most natural thing in the world! He was jaded.) Sin creates patterns and behaviors and thoughts that really separate us from experiencing God's love — for ourselves and others.

This has not been a fun, touchy-feely sermon. But it's an important one. And if you struggle with the word "Sin" and what it means, maybe trying thinking of it in these ways:

1) Is there a relationship in your life that is broken or just not as good as you'd like it to be? Something is causing that separation. Can you identify what it is?

2) Are there ways in which you feel like you have to compensate for something you feel you lack OR compromise on something you believe in to fit in? Something is causing those insecurities. What is it?

3) Are there times when you find yourself gossiping about others or getting involved in matters that really aren't your business? (Don't we all?!) Why is that?

Why do we care so much about the tawdriness of other people's lives? Is it because something is missing in our own?

Maybe find a "Nathan" to help you see what you cannot see on your own. Because the root of sin is separation, I think. Search for those separations...because God wants to bridge them with grace.

In a different book,¹¹ Father Richard Rohr said, *"Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us."*

That is the good news. Not that grace erases the harm that our sin causes others. But that grace enables healing to take place. For David. For Bathsheba. For you. For me. For all of us.

Amen.

¹¹ *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Second Half of Life.*