

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 30, 2006

Reflection:

If one has a new way of thinking, why not apply it wherever one's thought leads to? It is certainly entertaining to let oneself do so, but it is also very illuminating and capable of leading to new and deep insights.

– Frank Oppenheimer, Physicist

Readings: 2 Samuel: 11: 1 – 15

John 6: 1 - 21

Hymns:	Hymn # 132	Come Great God of All the Ages
	Hymn # 84	In the Cross of Christ I Glory
	Hymn # 147	Blessings and Honor

Confused by the Lights
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Is this morning's story about David, Bathsheba, and Uriah simply an example of David's humanity and the ultimate awareness of his subordination – even as King – to God?

Is it a tale about the abuse of power and moral responsibility by the leaders of ancient kingdoms? Well... let's see what we can come up with.

It occurred to me, as I found myself lost in thought and crossing a busy intersection of changing traffic signals the other night that I had become momentarily confused by the lights.

If you wonder where titles of some sermons come from, there you go. Suddenly, I saw David: powerful ruler, successful leader, lights of the paparazzi flashing all about, his ego puffed up considerably. Last week, remember, he was going to build God a house?

Remember how Nathan had to remind him – after God reminded Nathan – that, "Hello, David! You are not the one in charge"?

If you are a busy ruler, though, I guess that's easy to forget. Or, perhaps weighted against the enormous good you attribute to yourself and the privileges that brings with it – maybe even a bit of an attitude of noblesse oblige – you might just allow yourself to do things that clearer heads would otherwise reject.

Confused by the lights... David sees what he wants and he takes it; knowing full well that Bathsheba is the wife of another. This is the ruler of the mightiest of cities of the time, a king appointed by God over the chosen people, a ruler – who it seems – was – after all – quite human.

The subtexts to this marvelous narrative are many. For example, the season of fighting had returned and off went the army to pick up where it left off some months before. War was a seasonal thing, fully expected, prepared for; troops always in readiness, part of the fabric and plan of life.

This time though, and maybe times before, the king stayed home – sent his men into battle and arranged a little affair– with one of his general's wives. Was he struck by her beauty, just bored? Why was David not in battle himself? When – where – had his role changed to distant, safely, comfortably housed ruler with too much time on his hands - while his nation fought a war far away?

Warrior turned politician/ruler? Later in this same story Joab, the general who carried out the king's orders to place Uriah at the front of the battle so he would be killed – later, Joab is about to enter the city of Rabbah and to take it, having waged a successful campaign against the forces of that city. Joab sends a message to David that says, "King, we are about to enter the city. If you would like it captured in your name, you had better get here soon so you can make the entrance at the head of the army; otherwise, it will forever be known as the city that I conquered. David made that appointment.

Seems like a long way from David / Goliath / and a slingshot!

Had war and battle become so institutionalized that only an appearance now and then at the front was necessary?

But I am ahead of myself. Easy to do in the many threads of this narrative. The author juxtaposes Uriah against the King, the King who is now desperately trying to get Uriah to have relations with his wife, so that the child of the king that Bathsheba now carries – could be attributed to Uriah, thus saving the king and, perhaps, protecting Bathsheba and Uriah. Perhaps.

Anyway, Uriah refuses to break his oath, the oath that the warriors swore to before going into battle, not to have relations with their spouses until the battle was done. No matter what David tries, Uriah refuses to sleep with his wife while his fellow warriors are sleeping in tents, fighting the fight.

Is the author giving us another clear example of how the king, a warrior once himself, had forgotten such things and no longer lived by the code? Or now thought of himself as above the code?

And, so lost now, so confused and disoriented, distracted and disengaged, the only choice that David has left – to his thinking – is to have Uriah killed intentionally in battle. You can almost see him saying, “He, don’t blame me! I tried to get him to sleep with his wife. That’s all he had to do and everything would be ok. I am left with no choice other than “snap” to have him killed.”

The king had lost his moral compass. He had lost his perspective. His vision was clouded; his actions were erratic and antithetical to all he probably believed in – deep in his soul.

In the next few pages, Nathan comes in and in the famous narrative explains to the king about a man who had taken advantage of one of his fellow countrymen. The king incensed by the actions of “the man” states to Nathan that such a person should be “killed,” which didn’t exactly meant put to death – but that extreme penalties should be placed upon him.

The climax: Nathan spins to the king and says: “You are that man,” recounting all that David had done.

David is thunderstruck by his own actions, as if he for the first time sees what he has done. And he repents and is forgiven of his sin.

He probably wonders, as do we, how he got into such a situation.

But what is it about this passage that is meant for us to consider? Surely we know that what David did was wrong. We sort of shake our heads each time the humanity of the great leaders of the ancient biblical times are shown with their warts and calluses in place, especially if all we had ever heard of were the magnificent things they had done.

OK, David was human. We figured that and now we know that for sure. So, why the big story in the Bible?

Well, you will perhaps find your own connections and insight to the reading and this discussion. As my professor Barbara Austin-Lucas often said and I often repeat: When you read the Bible it reads you! So, let what comes to you come to you.

But, if we were to identify themes, one would surely be about sin: a name for actions that distance us from God. Nathan tells David, “You will not die because you have repented,” so David is forgiven. However, the unborn child will die shortly after birth (Solomon follows later) and of course, Uriah is dead, Joab has

been compromised, and Bathsheba has had her marriage and life as she knew it forever changed.

So, the sin that is forgiven of the sinner, does however remain in the world, mounting with other such actions, creating repercussion and “collateral damage” that goes on forever, one would think. I don’t believe it is too far of a stretch to use the Mideast Wars in support of this concept. In many ways, there have been individuals who have made peace on all sides of the conflagration, but the fire gets hotter and redder and refuses to die. The sins against nations and tribes of thousands of years ago are being fought today, still.

A case of residual sin, maybe a way of saying “evil”? Whatever, it is clear that the actions of the past are what have brought us here today. It is clear that David’s actions had long-term impact – not only on the way kings ruled, but also in the relationships between and among the tribes of Israel.

In so many ways, as clear as it is from this distant vantage point in time and history – it still doesn’t make sense. It makes no sense that we are today continuing to fight wars that began thousands of years ago. Haven’t we had enough time to work it out? What has gotten in the way? What are the obstacles that have slowed us down from coming together on this planet?

The following poem by Thomas Hardy was written in 1914, on the eve of the First World War. It’s called *Channel Firing*, and the channel referred to is the English Channel. The dead are being awakened by the warring and conflagrations and query of one another and God if this is not indeed judgment day, the day they will be awakened eternally from their rest. It captures the almost quizzical attitude of God in responding to the same question:

Channel Firing
Thomas Hardy (1840 – 1928)

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was Judgment Day.

And we sat upright. While drearisome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumbs,
The worms drew back into mounds,

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, “No;
It’s gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

“All nations striving to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christes sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

“That this is not the judgment-hour
For some of them’s a blessed thing,
For if it were they’d have to scour
Hell’s floor for so much threatening...

“Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need).”

So down we lay again. “I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,”
Said one, “than when God sent us under
In our indifferent century!”

And many a skeleton shook his head.
“Instead of preaching forty year,”
My neighbor Parson Thirdly said,
“I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.”

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

Once more, the reason for our being here comes into view. Slowly, the sounds of the guns become distant – not forgotten – but distant. A voice is heard, “So, Philip how are we going to feed these thousands of people who are surely hungry?”

Philip, faithful but a little dense doesn’t get it yet. Jesus has been with these disciples now for a while, and yet they still need work. “OK, what have we got? Some fishes and loaves? OK, Philip, you and the others have them sit down and then distribute the food, allowing them to take all they wish and eat.”

Somewhere, I hear Philip mumbling, “It must be the heat. Poor, Jesus, how are we ever going to feed all these people. Oh boy are they going to be upset when there is not enough to eat. Doesn’t matter, Jesus asked me to do it – so I’ll do it.

Who knows, he's pulled off some pretty amazing things before, let's see what happens here."

And, of course, once more – Jesus does it again.

For Christians, we believe that the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth provided history with "The Light, the truth, the Way" to stop the ravages and repercussions of sin from unabated destruction of souls and societies. In his life and death and resurrection, Jesus triumphed over death – and the ancient concept of sin as death – bringing new life and hope to every situation: whether feeding the multitudes miraculously or through spontaneous generosity (miraculous in itself) to the potential for every crisis we and this world face in our lives.

But for this to be done, we have to learn how to see beyond the four dimensions of space and time – to the other dimension of the presence of God in all – yes, in all – of our lives and situations.

I love the way this first century, itinerant preacher, and executed felon never raised a sword or a weapon of any kind. Instead, he raised up God and peoples' consciousness of God in the actions we know about him. He did this to such an extent that today – 100 generations later – we sit here in his name or the name of the God his life brought us to – however we know God.

The point is that Jesus, as far as we know, stayed pretty close to home, fed the hungry, healed the sick, prayed and worshipped in community, stuck by the strong and the weak, learned to open his heart and arms to all, and probably had every expectation of living his life in the same fullness as those around him.

Surely, though, knowing that he and those who followed him were always at risk for giving voice and dignity and promise to the least of his times, the least who were expected to be the most compliant, who instead turned out to be part of the greatest social and theological movement of all time.

It is very hard to come to a place with a voice in a world that seems to want to self-destruct - and not scream from every roof and pulpit. You know what I mean. And, I have to believe that Jesus felt the same way about his times. In fact, his teachings and practices were the balm for the times – the healing of all the brokenness: just recall his sermon on the mount. It would be difficult to say that there wasn't just a bit of a response to the political and social systems of the time – and a considerable threat in such preaching to those whom he was challenging.

And yet, Jesus never lost sight of his call: to the people who had the least and were the most affected. He stayed in his local setting, doing the work of Abba

and Spirit, believing that God would multiply his work and the work of those that followed him – as God saw fit.

And was he ever right. So, in these weeks, and months, and years of terrible turmoil and strife around the world; in the prayers and involvement we will share in the causes that call us as individuals or groups; in the moments of quiet anguish and resounding joy – let us not forget how we impact our world every day, just by remembering such things as we interact with others, with the God in others. This is what David forgot and what Jesus always remembered. The power was never in the sword that Jesus never raised.

I do, in my mind, try and think of the God in the person I am speaking with or interacting with – especially when they (or I) am being a little difficult. It is the Sanskrit greeting that most often touches my lips whether silently or in words:

Namaste: The spirit in me greets the spirit in you, this always has been about the work of the Spirit, and in this faith we share – we have the hope and the promise for the great peace that is yet to come – but on its way.

Namaste.