



ENTANGLED

SERIES: KING DAVID

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2 Samuel 11:1-37

17th Message

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Our text today from the book of 2 Samuel is what I would describe as the hinge of David's career. This story is very relevant for our own day. It is the story of God's representative caught in sexual entanglement, betrayal, treachery, and a cover-up. Sadly, the theme is all too relevant because it is so common today. No matter how jaded we become as we view these events from a distance, when we get close to the victims we discover that the pain that is caused is staggering.

What our society sorely lacks is a no holds barred, black and white version of events from God's perspective. The narrator in this story doesn't hold back. He takes us right into the glamour of the bedroom; the dark descent into treachery and death; then a forced march through every step of unspeakable pain and sorrow that will accompany David for the rest of his life and the life of the nation of Israel. In the background is God, who in our worst moments pursues, exposes, convicts, judges and restores us. We will focus on these events for the next three weeks; then we will take some time for reflection, repentance and renewal.

The context of this story is extremely important. In response to God's loyal-love (*hesed*), David had made *hesed* a key principle of his domestic policy. In chapter 10, he tried to make loyal-love the driving force of his foreign policy, too, sending an official delegation to mourn (an apt expression of *hesed*) the death of an old friend, the king of the Ammonites. But David's action is interpreted as a deceitful cover for a military exploit "to search, to spy and destroy." His ambassadors are sent home, humiliated, with beards clipped and buttocks exposed. The king of the Ammonites "chooses two areas of the human body by which he can most effectively humiliate his victims: the countenance and the buttocks. Then he disables their appearance by shaving and cutting."¹

These actions violate Israel's very being. They are tantamount to an act of war. In response, the infuriated David plans a large scale military offensive, with Joab at the helm.

I. Easy Adultery (11:1-5)

Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle (or, "at the same time the messengers had marched out," i.e. the previous year) that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem.

Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" And David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant." (NASB)

David specifically plans his revenge to coincide with the time he had sent the messengers the previous year.² It is in the midst of that context of war that the incident with Bathsheba, to which we now come, occurs. Contrary to times past, the warrior David stays home this time. But idleness quickly leads to fornication. From his royal perch, David takes a casual stroll after his afternoon nap, and he is attracted by the appearance of a naked woman bathing below. He inquires as to her identity, then he uses all his kingly powers to get her. "[T]he curtness of 'he took her'...betrays his sudden, moral brutality and immense desire."³

The astounding thing here is the ease with which David falls into adultery. The king of Israel, a man after God's own heart, loved from the gutter to the palace, in bed with a woman who is not his wife! It is shocking to think that it takes only four brief verbs until the deed is done. How stunning that this David, who was once a warrior when everyone stood idle because they were paralyzed by fear, is now idle when all around him are risking their lives. We are dazed that this man when he faced Goliath was spiritually governed not by what he saw, but by what he heard, Goliath's blasphemy. Now this same David is so overwhelmed by what he sees, he cannot hear anything. He is deaf to the title "wife"; he is stone cold to the name "Uriah," the intimate friend who pledged his loyalty to him in the wilderness and converted to the God of Israel for David's sake. We are aghast that this servant of Yahweh, who just earlier used his authority to send emissaries on missions of loyal-love, is now using royal envoys to cater to his own personal desire.

Are you stunned by this? Are you shocked? Perhaps you are immune to the pain because of the all too common occurrence of this type of thing—until it happens to you. Is this not a picture of our own lives? When we

are faced with rejection to our own loving overtures, how often have we turned around and embraced an idol as a balm for our grief?

Our last view of the sordid scene shows Bathsheba, who has cleansed herself of her uncleanness. This act of washing herself in the midst of David's embrace (something reserved for the sanctity of marriage) repulses us with David's impurity and acts of desecration (Fokkelman). What it reveals is that Bathsheba "had thus just had her period which implies that the child which she now expects...cannot possibly be Uriah's."⁴ The two little words (in Hebrew) spoken by Bathsheba are every man's nightmare: "I'm pregnant!" These two little words carry enough potency to undo kings. They tell us that our choices have consequences that have lifetime implications. David's worst fears have been realized.

But what he is soon to discover is that the task of covering sin is much more difficult than accomplishing the sin itself, even for a king. Easy adultery now becomes difficult deception.

II. Difficult Deception (11:6-13)

Then David sent to Joab, saying, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked concerning the welfare (*shalom*) of Joab and (the *shalom*) of the people and the state (*shalom*) of the war. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and a present from the king was sent out after him. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. (11:6-9)

The only way David can get out of the mess he has made for himself is to summon Uriah home from the front and convince him to pay his wife a conjugal visit. To accomplish this, all of David's kingly powers and resources are brought into play. Uriah is summoned and received in a highbrow atmosphere that has despicable ease written all over it. The word "peace" (*shalom*), used three times, is casually thrown about in the context of life-threatening war. But not even a word is recorded from Uriah to answer these niceties. This soldier's holy focus remains with his troops.

The perfunctory meeting accomplished, David encourages the war veteran to go home and "wash his feet" (a euphemism for sexual intercourse). To help matters along, the eager matchmaker sends the war hero home with a gift—some lingerie for his wife to enhance the evening perhaps, or a bottle of wine. But Uriah won't even allow himself one gaze at his beautiful wife. The holy mission consumes him totally. The king is foiled.

But he is not done. Verse 10:

Now when they told David, saying, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go

down to your house?" And Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, 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? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Stay here today also, and tomorrow I will let you go." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. Now David called him, and he ate and drank before him, and he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his bed with his lord's servants, but he did not go down to his house. (11:10-13)

David is no match for Uriah. The cover-up is much more difficult than he imagined, even for a king with all his resources. So David challenges Uriah as to his motives. He asks, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" What sort of man is this, anyway? Uriah's answer stabs David right in the heart: "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, 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? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." The act of sleeping with his wife is so repulsive to Uriah, in the face of vows of holy war, he refuses to even pronounce the word. That is why he says, "this thing."

As the adulterous king stares at the figure of Uriah he is forcefully confronted with a mirror image of himself when he was at his faithful best. This was the kind of single-minded focus that David had possessed for years. Uriah's passionate concern about the ark is drawn verbatim from David himself, from 2 Sam 7:2. This heroic figure provokes David's memory, reaching into the deepest part of his soul to draw the very best out the real David. If he stares at this beckoning image much longer, he will have to make a full confession.

But sadly, instead of confessing, David hardens his heart. He cranks things up a notch and resolves to keep the cover-up going. This time he desecrates his loyal brother by getting him drunk. David thinks that in his drunkenness, Uriah will compromise all that is holy within him and sleep with his wife. But the irony is that a drunken Uriah is a better man than a sober David. Uriah will not make that descent down to his own house. David is unable to play the role of pimp with Uriah. He is foiled again. "David's royal pretensions are debunked comically."⁵

The plot thickens. Adultery escalates to deception, and now deception escalates to treachery.

III. Terrible Treachery and Treason (11:14-25)

(a) Treachery (11:14-17)

Now it came about in the morning that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

And he had written in the letter, saying, "Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die." So it was as Joab kept watch on the city, that he put Uriah at the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city went out and fought against Joab, and some of the people among David's servants fell; and Uriah the Hittite also died.

If David cannot break Uriah's loyal-love, he will use it in the service of the cover-up. So he writes Uriah's death warrant. In a most tragic irony, Uriah faithfully carries the warrant to his executioner, Joab. These instructions detail an act of treachery under the guise of holy war.

But in the carrying out of the order, things get a little messy. They always do, don't they? More than one innocent Jew is slain. But the deed is done. David finally has his cover-up. There is no one left to question the king. No one, that is, except Joab, who is a little vexed by how history might assess the deed. He does not want to bear any of the blame if the event is regarded as treason by later generations, so he makes sure the king goes on record, absolving the general of any "misdeed."

(b) Was it Treason? (11:18-21)

Then Joab sent and reported to David all the events of the war. And he charged the messenger, saying, "When you have finished telling all the events of the war to the king, and if it happens that the king's wrath rises and he says to you, 'Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? 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 also.'"

Joab prepares the messenger for the worst. This event will not go down well in David's war memoirs. Joab is supposed to be well versed in military history. How could the general allow a repeat of the Abimelech story, the king who was stupid enough to get near the city wall and suffer death at the hands of a woman? So if David responds with rage, Joab instructs the messengers, then they should tell him, "your servant Uriah is dead." But Joab's words are double-edged. They not only protect the messenger, they also stab at David's weak heart. The name Abimelech means "my father is king." And Abimelech was brought down by a woman. What an apt title for David at this moment in his life. Joab's ringing question, "Why did you go so near the wall?" is a veiled rebuke to his superior.

(c) Hellish Hypocrisy (11:22-25)

So the messenger departed and came and reported to David all that Joab had sent him to tell. And the messenger said to David, "The men prevailed against us and came out against us in the field, but

we pressed them as far as the entrance of the gate. Moreover, the archers shot at your servants from the wall; so some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is also dead." Then David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours one as well as another; make your battle against the city stronger and overthrow it'; and so encourage him."

Heretofore, messengers bearing bad news had a poor record of survival with David. Anticipating an angry reply, this messenger doesn't wait for a response to give the information about Uriah. He blurts it out with the original report. Surprisingly, no rage and no tears come from David. This is highly unusual for him. He replies with just a little abstract theology, a quaint proverb, glibly applied: "the sword devours one as well as another." "War is war," replies David. "Casualties must be expected. *Ç'est la guerre*. Don't let it be evil in your eyes. Give it another go. Besiege them."

Emotions, or I should say, the lack of them, are often a dead giveaway to the guilty. The cover-up is now complete. David has but one more loose end to tie up. The story ends where it began, with Bathsheba in David's bed.

IV. Epilogue: Only One Loose End (11:26-27)

Now when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. When the time of mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house and she became his wife; then she bore him a son. But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight (eyes) of the Lord.

On this sad occasion, Israel's poet and master mourner does not mourn. I wonder what that was like for him. Certainly, the funeral was kept to a minimum. David did not write any poetic lament. He probably didn't even attend. It was enough to have to stare at Uriah when he was alive. How much more difficult it would be to stare in the face of the dead. But had he done so, David might have come to terms with what he had now become—not merely an adulterer and a murderer, but worse yet, a dead man, his soul cut off from Yahweh.

When the mourning period is over, David immediately plays the role of the "kinsman redeemer," the king caring for the widow, just as he cared for Mephibosheth earlier. How touching. For a second time David sends for Bathsheba. They marry, have a son, and live happily ever after. Only three people were aware of the true facts, and no one was telling. Joab could not tell. If he did, he too would be implicated. What could Bathsheba say? As for David, for the first time in his life he could not speak, not even to God.

There was only one leak in David's carefully fabricated vessel. The text says: "The thing was evil in the eyes of the Lord": "the thing" which Uriah could not bear to mention, "the thing" of which David said so glibly, "Do

not let this thing be evil in your eyes." We may think no one sees and no one cares, but when we cross the line and redefine what is good and what is evil, we have reached the depth of depravity. The Lord sees, and the Lord cares. And because the Lord loves David, he will act.

That is the hope of this story: If God loves you, he will uncover all your sins while you live, that your soul may not remain in death.

V. Painful, Needed Lessons

A realization, a warning, and a hope.

(a) A Realization: The Depth of Our Own Depravity

How do you feel about David now, the one who was shown so much love, now an adulterer and a murderer; the one who was so moved by the depths of *hesed*, now breaking all the bonds of loyal-love? After years of experiencing the loyal-love of God, all it took was one lustful look to cast David headlong into sin. Then, the sexual sin that resulted was so shameful that his fear of being exposed led him to far worse sins. He was willing to throw away his identity and take on entirely new personages: David the king became a Peeping Tom, a buffoon host at a cocktail party, a pimp, a thug who composed hit letters, a phony sage offering glib encouragement, and an impostor kinsman redeemer. *Hesed* was ripped apart in every one of these personages. So too were a man and his wife, a king and his court, a general and his soldiers, a king and his nation, a man and his God.

This sordid account brings us face to face with the depth of our own depravity. If we feel even a whiff of self-righteousness after reading this text, we have not entered in. There is not a man in this congregation who has not started down that road: throwing off his identity, taking on new personages, wanting to live in secret, planning cover-ups. This story is a warning about the depths of our own depravity.

How true are the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

**The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick,
Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)**

No one is immune from sin, especially sexual sin.

That is why this text raises three warnings. We must build walls of protection to help us when we are vulnerable.

(b) A Warning: When Are We Vulnerable?

First, notice that David made his illicit reach when he was angry, because he had extended loyal-love to someone and was violently rejected. If we are wallowing in the hurt of rejection we are especially vulnerable to sin's appeal. Second, notice that David left the battle and fell

into idleness. We need to stay in the battle until we die. The battleground is a much safer place than the ease of home. And third, David was vulnerable because he had been riding a tidal wave of success that had distanced him from loyal friends. No one had gotten close to him since Jonathan's death. He had no friend to confront, correct and rebuke him. No one challenged David's inquiry about Bathsheba; Joab did not try to overturn Uriah's death sentence. We are most vulnerable when we are hurt, idle, and isolated.

That is why there are no kings in the New Testament. Leadership is always shared in the church. And in that circle, the highest title is "brother." The main qualification for leadership in the church is the ability to foster strong relationships in every sphere of life. If men do not have intimate male friends, they are easy targets.

(c) Hope: God's Beckoning Voice

In the midst of this story of darkness comes God's wooing voice, subtle, powerful, penetrating. And it comes first through the voice of Torah. David hears the words "wife," and "friend." But he doesn't want to listen. Then God's voice comes dressed in the clothes of a close friend who is a mirror of his past greatness, a poignant reminder to David of his real identity. Although David stares at that image, he still rejects God's voice. Then, through a general comes a stronger word of rebuke, God's voice, pleading, beckoning, reminding David of who he is. But the king will not listen.

If that is how we respond when we hear the voice of God, if we won't listen, he will press a little harder. He will be the foil to all our plans and pretensions; we will be the buffoons. If that is to no avail, and we continue in our ways—an unrighteous union, a shady business deal, a desecrated birth—God will reluctantly, painfully give us what we want. But then he will send a prophet to pronounce judgment and uncover our cover-up. We will eventually confess, because spending the rest of our life under the weight of a cover-up is to sojourn in hell. Eventually we will confess, because God loves us. That is the hope of the gospel.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. I, King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 44.

2. See the argument of Fokkelman (*King David*, 50-51), accepting the *Ketib* reading "messengers" over the *Qere* "kings" in the Massoretic Text. There is but one consonant change between the two words.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 52.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 52.

5. See the well written and highly provocative pamphlet by Peter Berger, "You are the Man", The Trinity Forum Reading, 1992.