

Faith and Forgiveness

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13

August 2, 2009

I.

Our Old Testament reading today was the last part of a two part series about David and Bathsheba. Part one was last week, and at that time I said that I would speak on both parts today. Last week I also mentioned the classic 1951 movie about this biblical story.

And I mentioned that movie for a reason. It was the Hollywood version, not the biblical version. If you recall the movie, David and Bathsheba were portrayed as lonely people who met and fell in love, but their life together was haunted by war and palace intrigue. By the end of the movie you almost were rooting for them to prevail over the sinister forces trying to bring them down.

The biblical story is somewhat different, and is characterized by sin, betrayal, deception, and violence. The principal offender was the famous and powerful King David, who ended up violating forty percent of the Ten Commandments. He was responsible for adultery, murder, bearing false witness, and coveting his neighbor's wife. And he felt God's anger for what he did.

But the biblical story also has another aspect, which is David's repentance, redemption, and continued work in the Lord's service for the rest of his life. David and Bathsheba's son was King Solomon, who for a time led Israel to even greater glory than it had under David. Joseph, the husband of Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, was a descendant of Solomon, and many biblical scholars say that Mary herself was descended from another of David's sons.

Even so, David's disobedience is described in the Bible in detail. And it shows how sin and its consequences frequently are depicted in the Old Testament. God's judgment came quickly because people were held accountable under the law. Today, however, we still are accountable but have access to forgiveness by God's grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And sin can be a controversial topic in today's church. For some preachers it is an essential ingredient of their sermons. In other churches, however, it is not fashionable to discuss it at all. And the reason in both cases is that people only look at one side of a two-sided subject.

They either focus on sin and obedience, and ignore Christ's love and forgiveness. Or else they believe Christ's love alone will save them and they can disregard accountability and consequences.

Both approaches are the result of wearing spiritual blinders, so to speak. But there is another way. Today's Old Testament reading, in the context of our Christian hope in the New Testament, not only shows what happens when we forget about God, but also offers a hopeful perspective on what happens when we remember God.

II.

As we look at today's reading, let's review part one from last week. The story began when King David, walking on the roof of his house, looked down and saw Bathsheba bathing nearby. Presumably his roof-top view made this possible. And Bathsheba was very beautiful, but she was married to a fellow named Uriah, who was an officer in David's army and was away at the front.

So David summoned her to his palace, and as a result Bathsheba became pregnant. This was not one of David's finer moments; a commander seducing one of his officers' wives.

And it gets worse. David tried to cover up his involvement by calling Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, home from battle for some R & R. David assumed that Uriah would go home to Bathsheba, and thus it would appear that Uriah was the father of the baby. The problem would go away.

Uriah, however, did not cooperate. He refused to go home, saying that as long as his men and officers were camping in open fields, he could not sleep in a comfortable bed, and therefore he slept among the servants.

David did not give up. He invited Uriah to dinner the next night and got him drunk. But this didn't work either. So David descended further into the depths and sent a message to Uriah's commander to place Uriah in the forefront of combat, and then leave him defenseless to be slain.

This is where we pick up today's reading. Uriah was killed, David married Bathsheba, and she had a son, which David acknowledged as his own. But David was not home free. God knew all that happened, and so God spoke to his prophet, Nathan, who also was one of David's advisers. And most of the rest of the reading is about Nathan telling David what God thought about David's sins.

And Nathan began with a parable. He told of a wealthy man with many sheep, and a poor man with only one lamb that was very dear to him. The wealthy man wanted to prepare a meal for a guest, but instead of using one of his own sheep he took the poor man's only lamb. David was outraged at what the rich man in the story had done, and then Nathan said "You are the man!" David with many wives, had taken poor Uriah's only wife, and then caused Uriah to be killed.

And Nathan then proclaimed God's judgment on David. Even though David would continue as a mighty king, and even though David and Bathsheba later would have another son, Solomon, who would become king, David's house would always know violence, betrayal, and trouble. And if we would read further in the Bible we would see that is exactly what happened.

The first son of David and Bathsheba became ill and died right away. Three of David's other sons later died violent deaths, and two of his sons tried to take the kingship from him. Much of his remaining life was filled with internal conflict, division, and difficulties.

III.

But this was not the defining moment in David's life, even though it was a turning point. We recall that David also was chosen by God to become a great king, he united the divided tribes and regions of the Holy Land into one nation dedicated to God's glory, and he eliminated Israel's pagan enemies. God also promised that God's kingdom on earth would be established forever through David's descendants.

And so we should not remember David only for what happened in the readings of last week and today. To do so would be like tuning in to the middle of a movie, watching for ten minutes, switching to something else, and thinking that we understood the entire plot. David's life was a glorious and exciting drama that was dominant on the stage of Israel's history. Scripture tells us that he "died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor" (1 Chron. 29:28).

And we also should not read this Old Testament story apart from the teachings of the New Testament. There we are told we all are sinners whose salvation depends entirely on our faith in Jesus Christ (Ro. 3:26). And there we are told that through faith and repentance we can be transformed and forgiven (Acts 26:18).

So, while we take seriously the Old Testament stories of David, and God's punishment of the sinful generations that followed, we should not assume they are models for our own lives. I have heard people worry that problems they were experiencing resulted from sin or disobedience. They thought God was punishing them today in the same way he punished the ancient Hebrews.

And certainly, there can be unhappy consequences that naturally flow from some of the things we do. There can be direct cause and effect relationships. And when we do not do God's will we can lose the joy and blessings that come with obedience and a right relationship with God.

But our faith tells us to always have hope. We are called to believe that Jesus Christ offers us forgiveness, and transformation, and redemption if we truly seek it. God is not waiting to zap us every time we fail to do his will for us. If we turn to our Lord and Savior, if we rely on him, then we can be strengthened when we are tempted and lifted up when we fall.

And we know that we all are susceptible to temptation and sin. St. Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (1 Cor. 10:13), and "there is no one who [always] is righteous, not even one" (Ro. 3:10-12). And John, speaking of all Christians, said, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jo. 1:8).

IV.

So, what does this mean for us today? We can begin by recognizing that we all are like David, at least in the sense that we are not always obedient. There probably are transgressions in our lives that we must acknowledge and for which we must repent if we believe in our Christian hope. That certainly applies to me, and in some ways even giving a sermon on sin can seem hypocritical because I know that I do not always do what God wants me to do.

That's one of the reasons we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. In the liturgy we confess our sins, exchange the peace, and begin the Eucharistic prayer. This is not an empty ritual. I am not up here just reciting words. This is an important time. Things actually happen in our spiritual lives during this part of the service even though they are not visible. We truly are forgiven when we come to the rail with a contrite heart.

And our common life together at St. Thomas can help us live into our faith during the week. We might think of the analogy of cell phone reception. When we get too far away from the tower we can lose the signal, and we have no service. As we get closer to the tower the signal becomes stronger our calls go through.

If we consider the Holy Spirit to be like the cell phone tower, and if we think about our calls as prayers, then we know what God wants us to do. Stay close to the tower. Our calls will go through. The church can help us do that. Through the Holy Spirit we can know God's will and be strengthened to do it.

V.

This sermon began with the story of David and Bathsheba and the consequences of their sin. And David certainly is one of the commanding figures of the Old Testament. I also spoke of how the New Testament governs our lives today. And the New Testament story of the apostle Peter stands right beside that of David as an example to us all.

Peter was a believer, a follower and disciple of the Lord. His devotion and commitment to Jesus is apparent from all the Gospels. Yet, as we hear each year during Lent, Peter denied our Lord three times, and thought he was lost. But he was not lost, he was loved and saved and forgiven, and became the rock on which the church was built.

We can be forgiven and reunited with God in the same way. We can deny Jesus, once, three times, or ten times. It makes no difference other than the separation and guilt we feel, like the guilt Peter felt, until reconciliation occurs. We are always asked to follow Jesus no matter where we are in our lives or what we have done. For God it is never too late to turn away from the things that trouble us, and turn to a new life in Christ. *Amen.*