

A sermon delivered by
The Rev. David W. Fleenor

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, June 17, 2007
Third Sunday After Pentecost

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15](#)

[Galatians 2:11-21](#)

[Luke 7:36-50](#)

[Psalm 32 or 32:1-8](#)

Introduction

This sermon is rated PG-13.

In recent years there have been several big-budget, Hollywood movies made featuring A-list Celebes based on historic events. A few examples include [Gladiator](#) in 2000 starring Russell Crowe; [Troy](#) in 2004 starring Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom; [Alexander](#) in 2004 featuring Anthony Hopkins and Angelina Jolie; and finally, one of my favorites, [Rome](#), an HBO series about the beginning of the Roman Empire. It seems in order to make a successful major motion picture these days a few key ingredients are necessary: violence, romance, conspiracy and deception.

Well, if any of you are searching for a great movie script I've got one for you that includes all of these elements. It has no copyright, it is in the public domain, and we just heard it read – it is the Old Testament lesson for today found in 2 Samuel. In actuality, 2 the story of David and Bathsheba was made into a [movie](#) back in 1951, but the story is so good I think its time for a big-time Hollywood remake.

The problem with what you just heard read is that you only heard the latter half of the story which begins with the statement, “When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him.” This leaves us with several questions: Who is the wife of Uriah? Who is Uriah and why is he dead? And, what does this have to do with King David? Beginning with this statement, the editors of the lectionary have set up what would make a good, suspense-filled opening scene for the movie about David and Bathsheba.

The rest of the movie would answer all of these questions, which the preceding chapter (2 Samuel 11) addresses. Here's the story:

The Story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12)

While David's army is out doing battle on his behalf, he remains in the capital city of Jerusalem. Late one afternoon after reclining on his couch for some time, he rises and goes to the rooftop. While there he catches a glimpse of a beautiful woman bathing. As

a teenager growing up I was told that you can't really help the first glance. But it's when you decide to take the second one that you can get into trouble, and this held true for David. Lust took root in his heart and he sent his servant to find out more about the woman, a blatant misuse of his power. Not to mention, he also broke the commandment "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife."¹ When his servant returned, he learned that the beautiful woman was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David's soldiers fighting in the war. So now we know a little bit more about that opening scene where we saw the wife of Uriah lamenting the death of her husband. But we still do not yet know how he died. The story continues.

David sent his servants to get Bathsheba and bring her to him. Upon her arrival, to use the Biblical language, "He lay with her."² He has now broken another commandment, "You shall not commit adultery."³ Following this event, David sends Bathsheba back home. She later learns that she is pregnant and sends word to let David know. This is a crucial point in the story and highlights an important lesson. You will note that David could have acknowledged his wrongdoing before the consequences were made known, but he did not. Oftentimes, we come to confession not because of the painful conviction within us that we have done wrong, but because of the remorse we feel for the consequences of our wrongdoing. In short, he fears getting caught and this moves him to take action. But what kind of action will he take? He could either A) *confess* his sin, *repent*, that is turn away from his sin, and *make amends*, that is seek to make right his wrong; or he could B) hide his sin, go deeper into it, and attempt to cover it up. David chooses the latter. This is where the conniving and conspiracy come in. David hatches a plan to cover up his sin that brings to mind the quote from [Sir Walter Scott](#), "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Continuing to spin his web, David sends word to Joab, one of his commanders in battle, and requests Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, to be sent to him. Upon Uriah's arrival, David nonchalantly and discreetly asks him how he and the people are faring and how the war is going. You know, just checking in; he wants to know for no particular reason how everybody's doing. And then David tells Uriah to basically take a small break, go home and enjoy your house and your wife, if you know what I mean. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. He wants Uriah to be at home with his wife for a brief period of time so that when she gives birth – remembering that there is no DNA evidence at this time – it will appear as if the child was conceived on this visit.

But there is a glitch in his plan (one of the plot points that makes this such an interesting story). Uriah is a faithful soldier. He does not go home that evening. Instead, he sleeps at "the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord."⁴ He could not imagine being unfaithful to his brothers-in-arms back on the battlefield. How could he have the pleasure of a night at home when they were off fighting and sleeping in warlike conditions? It is unthinkable. He would not do it. David finds out and figures that if he

¹ Exodus 20: 17

² 2 Samuel 11: 4

³ Exodus 20: 14

⁴ 2 Samuel 11:9

has Uriah stay in Jerusalem a few more nights, then perhaps Uriah will visit his wife and fulfill his clandestine plan. In fact, to make sure, David invites Uriah up for a meal and “fills him with wine” with the expectation that he will go home. But he doesn’t. David has been foiled unwittingly and has to go to plan B.

He writes a letter and sends it to Joab, the commanding officer in battle. In the letter David instructs Joab to place Uriah on the “forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.”⁵ Joab does so and Uriah is killed in battle. David has now broken another commandment, “You shall not murder”⁶ David is notified and word gets back to Bathsheba. Now we, the audience, have caught up to the opening line, “When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him.” Now some of our questions have been answered. We know who Uriah and his wife are and what relationship they have to King David. What is so salacious about this story is that the King’s role was to uphold justice and he had done just the opposite: he had plotted and schemed to perpetrate injustice. What’s more is that the King had many wives already, but poor Uriah had only one. David not only lusted after Bathsheba, but also lusted after more when he already had enough. This is known as concupiscence, and theologian Paul Tillich understood it to occur “when a person dominates and exploits everything possible within life, pursuing an unlimited desire for abundance in material possessions, knowledge, power...and all other aspects of one’s relation to the world.”⁷ In Tillich’s thought, concupiscence is one of the three basic causes of sin, along with unbelief and pride. Nevertheless, David colorfully and robustly illustrates sin in many of its varieties *par excellence*.

It is interesting to note that David has so completely and successfully, in all of his plotting and conniving, deceived himself to the point that he can’t and won’t recognize his wrongdoing. He continues down that path of covering it up. To cover up our sin requires that we isolate ourselves; that we dis-integrate ourselves, meaning we cut one part of us off from another part of us; it requires that we skulk about in the darkness hiding parts of ourselves that we do not want brought into the light of day. This dis-integration of ourselves is contrary to God’s plan for us to be made whole. Another way of understanding salvation is wholeness and, as Archbishop Rowan Williams has said, the goal of the Christian life is wholeness.⁸

In this story we have a gleaming example of how God breaks in and calls us out of our sin, with forgiveness as the ultimate goal. God sends a prophet named Nathan to wake David up from his sin-induced, spiritually drunken stupor. David is intoxicated by sin and blind to his wrongdoing. And so Nathan presents him with a sobering story.

Nathan’s Sobering Story

⁵ 2 Samuel 11: 15

⁶ Exodus 20:13.

⁷ Richard M. Pomeroy, *Paul Tillich: A Theology for the 21st Century* (New York: Writer’s Showcase, 2002) xxi.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1990) 12.

There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had an abundance of flocks and herds, so countless that he probably hadn't even named one of them. He probably had someone keep track of his anonymous sheep by some numeric method. He didn't know them, and didn't care to know them. His sheep were merely property, a means to an end.

But the poor man had one little female lamb that as a little boy he had purchased, probably after skimping and saving what little money he could get a hold of. He named her something like Sally, or what its Hebrew equivalent is. As he was growing up he raised Sally with lots of TLC, and when he had become an adult and had children of his own, Sally was their pet too. The poor man and his poor family made room in their meager budget to feed and take care of Sally because they loved that little lamb. She was an end in herself.

One day a traveler came into town to visit the rich man. As it was customary to serve up a nice meal to a traveler, the rich man began to think of which lamb he would prepare for their feast. After giving it some thought he decided that he really didn't want to dip into his abundant herd and sacrifice a lamb for this traveler. But knowing that he must prepare a feast in order to keep the custom, he exploited the nameless poor man nearby and took Sally, the family pet, and prepared her for the feast, giving no thought of what Sally had meant to the poor family.

When King David heard this story he was outraged and impulsively told Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."⁹

And here Nathan drops the bomb on David. "You are the man!" This is the climax of the story. You can see the camera zoom in to David's face as his expression changes from a searing outrage to eye-popping guilt and grief. David is now awakened from his intoxicating self-deception with the words, "You are the man!"

As if David really needed any further explanation, Nathan continues with the Word of the Lord. He basically reminds David that he was chosen by God as the leader of these people, rescued from certain death at the hand of Saul, given more material goods than any human could want or need, and provided with a plethora of companionship in his harem. Furthermore, the Lord says to David, if you had just asked for more I would have given it to you! That David would do this is simply inconceivable.

Like someone asleep in the dead of night when the lamp is suddenly turned on, David is stunned by the prophet's words and falls to his knees to confess his sin and repent. He has finally come to his senses.

The story continues on with Bathsheba giving birth to the child, but it dies shortly thereafter. David goes through a period of deep grief, and when it was finished he bore another child with Bathsheba, called Solomon.

⁹ 2 Samuel 12: 6

Global and Personal Implications of the Story

This story is really a tragic one, but it illustrates several important points.

First, on a global level, I see our own country especially in the story that Nathan tells David. Why does a rich nation need to exploit the poor when it has more than enough? The answer is that we don't *need* to, but we *choose* to out of a lust for more and a delusional fear of an inconceivable scarcity. One result of our lust for more, even though we as a nation have plenty, is global poverty. It is well known that one billion people, or 1 in 6, live on less than \$1 per day; every day 30,000 children, or 1 every 3 seconds, die as a result of preventable consequences of extreme poverty; and 500,000 women die every year from complications of pregnancy that are exacerbated by poverty.¹⁰ May God help us amend our ways as consumers that knowingly and unknowingly exploit the world's poor through our spending habits. And may God help us seek to influence political leaders and multi-national corporations to do justice.¹¹

Second, on a personal level, the story of David and Bathsheba illustrates the point that to sin is a bad thing, but not the worst thing. The worst thing we can do when we sin – and it is inevitable that we will – is to deceive ourselves and others by seeking to cover it up. Our sin separates from God, others, and ourselves and, if left unacknowledged and unexamined, can lead to our demise. We are created to be in relationship and community. The way back to relationship and community is through confession, repentance and forgiveness. These transactions with God and others deepen our relationships.

Let me illustrate this from the world of customer service. Companies are always looking for ways to cultivate customer loyalty. Research done many years ago in the airline industry revealed that when customers received poor service they were likely to switch brands or companies. But when the company was able to engage the customer around the issue and reconcile the problem – a process known as [service recovery](#) – then the customer became more loyal. The CEO of Southwest Airlines quipped that perhaps companies should build glitches into their systems to create small problems for customers that are easily fixed by the company. The result would be a more loyal customer and increased profits. I don't recommend building in intentional transgressions into your relationships. I am sure we all have our fair share of unintentional transgressions. But the point is that when we engage the other person around the transgression, it has the potential to deepen the relationship.

In the Gospel lesson for today Jesus tells an interesting story that highlights this point: the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. In other words, the one forgiven of many sins will be so grateful that he or she will surely be filled with grace and love. But the one that chooses not to acknowledge his or her sins will fail to experience the redemption and deepening of relationship that occurs when reconciliation takes place.

¹⁰ Info provided by [Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation](#) (EGR).

¹¹ There are many organizations that one can join to get involved in these issues, such as the [One Campaign](#) or [Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation](#).

The Confession of Sin and The Peace

On a practical level, we are fortunate that built into our liturgy are at least two opportunities for us to be reconciled to God, others, and self.

The first is the [*Confession of Sin*](#). A part of the Anglo-Catholic spirituality is a regular confession of sin done in the context of the Eucharist. Some say that confessing our sins every week may have the effect of watering it down and making it meaningless. But I think otherwise. The beauty of regular confession is that it reminds us of God's ever-ready invitation into deeper relationship with him. It also reminds us of God's great willingness to forgive us and to continue to make us whole.

The second part of the liturgy that focuses on reconciliation and forgiveness is [*The Peace*](#). Many of us experience it as a simple greeting, but its true intention is made known in Matthew 5 where Jesus says, "...if you are offering your gift at the altar [and recall that the peace takes place before the offering in our liturgy] and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." The passing of the peace is intended to be a time for us to reconcile with those in our community with which we are at odds.

Conclusion

I don't know if Hollywood will ever remake the story of David and Bathsheba into an Academy Award winning motion picture featuring a top-named movie star, although I think they should. Nevertheless, this intricate and spellbinding story will continue to loom large in my imagination and serve as a reminder of what can go wrong when one tries to cover up sin instead of confessing it and seeking forgiveness. The story also reminds me of God's unfailing love and ever-ready forgiveness. In the end, David had to live with the consequences of his sins, as we all must; but God's grace still prevailed as God chose to put away David's sin, as he always will.

Let us find comfort in this fact along with the words of the Psalmist, "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven¹², and whose sin is put away!"¹³

¹² For a brief article from a Positive Psychology perspective on forgiveness, see ["The Miracle and Irony of Forgiving."](#)

¹³ Psalm 32:1