

The lectionary focuses on David almost the whole summer long. When we began David's story, he was the unexpected, faith-filled, youthful hero. After the tormented reign of Saul, we read that David was God's anointed one. The wind of God's favor was blowing at his back. David was a warrior, a fighter in whom the people of Israel have come to trust. Now, many battles & conquests later, sitting high on the throne, David falls into the depths. David's army was at war with Ammon, besieging the city of Rabbah. David should have been in the field with his troops, but feeling too old to be heroic, he leaves the war to his commanding general, Joab. He remains behind in Jerusalem spending long afternoons napping on his couch. It is the first time that David had not led his army into battle.

The text begins with these words: "*In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...*" "*In the spring*" makes it seem part of the natural cycle of seasons. David has made war routine. It's spring, therefore kings make war. The season of new life is ironically the season of taking life. This is a clue to how to interpret the text of royal betrayal and murder. These words reveal the underlying assumption of what it means to be King: war, violence, and the taking of human lives. The story raises deep moral problems with the very idea of "king."

While his troops are at war, David has too much time on his hands. Strolling about on the roof of his palace, the highest point of his capital city, David could look down into the courtyard of the homes around the palace. He happens to spy a beautiful woman bathing. David inquires about the beautiful woman and finds out her name, Bathsheba, and that she is married to one of his soldiers, Uriah. She is clearly off limits to David. But David takes her anyway. Even though he already has a few wives. Scripture offers us no long, tortured wrestling with conscience. King David is at the height of his autonomy and royal power. He acts quickly upon his desires. And Bathsheba is powerless. She had no idea there was a "peeping Tom" out there, and there is not a single word that suggests that Bathsheba was a willing participant in this act of adultery by the king.

When Bathsheba sends word that she is pregnant, it is a seemingly small problem for the king. To cover the growing evidence of his indiscretion, David calls husband Uriah from the battlefield, expecting that Uriah will go and sleep with his own wife and therefore conceal the fact that David made her pregnant. Faithful to his military and scriptural oath not to have sexual relations while on duty, Uriah foiled David's deception. Uriah is a man of honor, clearly more honorable than the king. He sticks close to his king, even sleeping at his door. David again encourages him to go home for a rest. But he stays with the king. David's little cover-up didn't work.

What's plan "B"? Simply eliminating the soldier would make the whole affair will go away. Taking another man's life has been part of his life as the beloved King, God's Warrior and Israel's Defender. So he sends a message to Joab, his general, who is on the battlefield. "*Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.*" Shockingly, David gives the message to Uriah who unknowingly hand-delivers his own death sentence. David orders

Uriah's execution. It's murder. There is no other way to get around it. The letter is explicit. The writer spares few details. David is shown in the harshest light to be arrogant, deceitful, dishonest, corrupt, a murderer. In short, he is a man who thinks he is above the law. The story rivals any contemporary soap opera.

David's actions break 4 of the Ten Commandments (coveting your neighbor's spouse, adultery, lying, murder). It sets off a series of events that plunge both himself, his family and the nation he has so carefully built into chaos, conflict and disintegration. That action leads eventually to death, another rape, murder and then a rebellion that split his family and his nation. In this story, it is clear that David's success as a leader and king of Israel has gone to his head. No longer a "man after God's own heart", this story reveals David's inadequacies, failures and sinfulness as a leader. It is the story of the radical abuse of unilateral power.

Scripture shows that even the most moral of persons can fall, the most powerful people have weaknesses, and no one, not even David, is perfect. It is, indeed, a story about a great and powerful king's wrongdoing. But it is also a story about a good man's self-deception. I don't believe that David, when he was out herding sheep as a boy and young man, intended to become a corrupt, deceitful adulterer and murderer. Something happened along the way. At some point, with absolute power, he began to deceive himself, or think that he was so blessed by God, that he was above God's law.

Perhaps, in order to persist in thinking of himself as a good and decent man, an upright king and an honorable servant of God, he told himself that as king he had special privileges regarding affairs of the heart. Or maybe he used some modern rationalizations: "*I love Bathsheba so much that it doesn't matter what the rules say*"; or "*Our love is different, holy and pure in itself*". Perhaps he persuaded himself that as king he had every right to send any soldier to any place to do anything he bids. "*This is not a democracy after all, but a monarchy, and I am engaged in battle; and all of my soldiers are at my disposal.*" A few moves like these and David could appear to himself as a good man.

David deceives himself because, initially, he does not feel guilty about what he has done. Self-deceivers congratulate themselves on a single act of generosity, telling themselves that they are generous people; or they dwell on the faults of others; or they avoid truth-tellers who might bring them out into the light, preferring the company of those who will not expose them to themselves. The loss of self-honesty undermines the inner life. After awhile one cannot trust oneself.

We see this type of self-deception constantly in the news don't we? Among some politicians, and even among some religious leaders. The problem of leadership and power are recurrent themes in the Bible. The question about leadership remains relevant: Is it possible for any empire to provide peace and well-being for all? Sin and corruption seem to be inescapably everywhere. The path of sin, once entered, may lead ultimately to the destruction of innocent people. Another way of asking the question: Is it possible that a religious or political leader can "give" rather than "take"? It makes President Jimmy Carter look like a saint when he said he had lusted in his heart, when

compared to countless politicians & religious leaders since who have hit the airwaves. We could easily go through a litany of names of those who have fallen. And just recently, with the news of Gov. Mark Sanford of SC – who compared himself to King David. From our vantage point, it looks like his remorse is from being caught, not necessarily true humility and repentance.

So...the question? Must power and temptation always lead to sin? There are choices all along the way. What could David have done differently? If he had gone to war with his troops, in accordance with the custom of the day, this would never have happened. If he had, out of respect for the woman bathing, either turned his head or gone inside his home, history would read much differently. He ran an obvious stop sign when he sent for her; another, when he lay with her; still another, when he sent for her husband in order to stage a cover-up. The list of places where David could have stopped is long.

Where is the relevance in this scripture for us? The vast majority of us don't become adulterers or murderers. And yet, there always exists the possibility for us to deceive ourselves and forget about God. We are all given choices along the way. When we are consumed by lust or anger or jealousy we are blind to the consequences, we are deaf to the opinions of others – even those closest to us. We have the choice to turn toward God, or away from God. We have the choice to receive what God has given us and use it for God's glory, or to use for self-gratification. David's real sin was his arrogance and lack of humility, and thinking all of his successes were his alone. He forgot the blessings that God gave him, and forgot that he was not self-made.

Scripture records that eventually David does what all self-deceivers must do to be free of self-deception: he confesses his wrongdoing: "I have sinned against the Lord," he says. Once the self-deception is overcome, remorse sets in, and broken relations can be mended. What are our choices? What are we faced with every day. Which road will we choose? Stay tuned next week when Sheri will continue the story of David as he is brought up short by Nathan....