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Lent Series 2012: *Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses*
3/28/2012, Midweek Lent 5
David and Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11:1-27

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 5)

P Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE 2 Samuel 11:1-28, NJB

¹At the turn of the year, at the time when kings go campaigning, David sent Joab¹ and with him his guards and all Israel. They massacred the Ammonites and laid siege to Rabbah-of-the-Ammonites. David, however, remained in Jerusalem.

²It happened towards evening when David had got up from resting and was strolling on the palace roof, that from the roof he saw a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³David made enquiries about this woman and was told, 'Why, that is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite².'

⁴David then sent messengers to fetch her. She came to him, and he lay with her, just after she had purified herself from her period. She then went home again.

⁵The woman conceived and sent word to David, 'I am pregnant.'

⁶David then sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite,' whereupon Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah reached him, David asked how Joab was and how the army was and how the war was going. ⁸David then said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house and wash your feet.' Uriah left the palace and was followed by a present from the king's table. ⁹Uriah, however, slept at the palace gate with all his master's bodyguard and did not go down to his house.³

¹⁰This was reported to David; 'Uriah', they said 'has not gone down to his house.' So David asked Uriah, 'Haven't you just arrived from the journey? Why didn't you go down to your house?' ¹¹To which Uriah replied, 'The ark, Israel and Judah are lodged in huts; my master Joab and my lord's guards are camping

¹ The commander of Israel's army.

² Uriah is a foreign mercenary. Deuteronomy 7:1 indicates that the Hittites were among the Canaanites – the original population of Palestine before Israel conquered them. Also, the Hittites were a people of Asia Minor. The Kingdom of the Hittites was in modern-day Turkey.

³ Continenence in war was a religious obligation, see *1 Samuel 21:1-6*. Uriah regards himself as still on campaign. (NJB)

in the open. Am I to go to my house, then, and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As [the LORD] lives, and as you yourself live, I shall do no such thing!

¹²David then said to Uriah, ‘Stay on here today; tomorrow I shall send you off.’ So Uriah stayed that day in Jerusalem. ¹³The next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk. In the evening, Uriah went out and bedded down with his master’s bodyguard, but did not go down to his house.

¹⁴Next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, ‘Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest and then fall back, so that he gets wounded and killed.’ ¹⁶Joab, then besieging the city, stationed Uriah at a point where he knew that there would be tough fighters. ¹⁷The people of the city sallied out and engaged Joab; there were casualties in the army, among David’s guards, and Uriah the Hittite was killed as well.

¹⁸Joab sent David a full account of the battle. ¹⁹To the messenger he gave this order: ‘When you have finished telling the king all about the battle, ²⁰if the king’s anger is aroused and he says, “Why did you go near the town to give battle? Didn’t you know that they would shoot from the ramparts? ²¹Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Wasn’t it a woman who dropped a millstone on him from the ramparts, causing his death at Thebez? Why did you go near the ramparts?” you are to say, “Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.”’

²²So the messenger set off and, on his arrival, told David everything that Joab had instructed him to say. David flew into a rage with Joab and said to the messenger, ‘Why did you go near the ramparts? Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Wasn’t it a woman who dropped a millstone on him from the ramparts, causing his death at Thebez? Why did you go near the ramparts?’

²³The messenger replied to David, ‘Their men had won an initial advantage and then came out to engage us in the open. We then drove them back into the gateway, ²⁴but the archers shot at your retainers from the ramparts; some of the king’s retainers lost their lives, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.’

²⁵David then said to the messenger, ‘Say this to Joab, “Do not take the matter to heart; the sword devours now one and now another. Attack the town in greater force and destroy it.” That will encourage him.’ ²⁶When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she mourned for her husband. ²⁷When the period of mourning was over, David sent to have her brought to his house; she became his wife and bore him a son. But what David had done displeased [the LORD].

HYMN LBW 383 *Rise Up, O Saints of God!*

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening's story of King David, Bathsheba and her poor husband, Uriah, is a moral disaster. Such abuse and cruel manipulation of others might have been common for kings in those days, but it was unworthy of *any* of them. Especially it was unworthy of David! That man had been anointed with the Holy Spirit when he was but a boy. He had been protected by the Lord against lion, bear, Goliath, and the wrath of King Saul and all his armies. Finally, the Lord had entrusted the kingship of the people to David. What had the Lord ever done to David that David should so callously disregard the ways of the Lord?

Yet David did his wicked deeds and went merrily on his way. He committed adultery, sleeping with another man's wife. He abused that wife by summoning her in the first place and then taking her. He murdered Uriah. I think that is the right way to put it. David took his life in an unjust way. He manipulated his commanding general, Joab, in his foul plans. At this point, Joab is a more noble man than David is. In fact, the most noble of them all seems to be the cast-off soldier Uriah. This soldier is a foreigner, a Hittite. He seems to be a mercenary -- a soldier for hire. But if he be a foreigner, he seems to have understood the laws and ways of Israel better than Israel's king himself. The rules, for example, requiring withdrawal from sex during a military campaign might not have been Hittite rules at all. But they were the rules of Israel, so Uriah lived by them. Even King David's attempt to get him drunk so that his discipline would relax and he would sleep with his wife did not work. Uriah answers that he intends to live according to high principles:

¹¹To which Uriah replied, 'The ark, Israel and Judah are lodged in huts; my master Joab and my lord's guards are camping in the open. Am I to go to my house, then, and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As [the LORD] lives, and as you yourself live, I shall do no such thing!'

So, the golden crown, the throne, the royal robes belong to David, while Uriah is a common soldier soon to be killed. But in heaven's eyes, I do believe that Uriah is a more royal man than David is. After all, heaven measures things differently from the world. It is as Jesus says:

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.
(Matthew 19;30, KJV)

There are nurses' aids, for example, all over our town cleaning and comforting elderly folk and sick folk, right at this minute, I bet. The world hardly knows,

but God does! And the world might little have known what David did to Bathsheba and Uriah, but God did. One day, the truth of things will be revealed. And in that day, many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first. This is not a wish or a dream, but plain reality. This is how things are going to work out. David had no chance of getting away with what he did in those days of his cruelty.

THE STARTING POINT

To my mind, the starting point of this story of moral disaster is the first verse. I will read it again, this time from the *Revised Standard Version*:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 11:1, RSV)

This, I suggest, is the starting point of David's sin: he lingered at home when he should have been out doing battle for Israel. He neglected his duty. It was springtime. It was the time for military campaigns. It was the time when kings "go forth to battle." But David did not go forth. He sent Joab forth. He sent his armies forth. But David lingered and lounged about, and in his lingering, he fell into great sin.

Still, when I shift from the deed that David did, which I can easily condemn, to *why* David might have done it, then I find myself feeling some sympathy for the man. Or at least, I recognize that what David did is not that uncommon for humanity. Perhaps this simple observation should give us reason for alarm. Lingered about instead of doing our duty does not seem that terrible of a thing. But such lingering can both reflect underlying troubles and lead to grievous sin and abuse of others.

WHY DID DAVID LINGER?

So, why did David linger? Why didn't he put on his royal armor, hop up onto his royal horse, and go out to do battle? Why did he send others, but dawdle when it came to himself? Well, maybe he was simply being lazy. But that is rather hard to imagine. I mean, the call of duty can make even lazy people get up and do what needs to be done -- especially when their duty is a public one. And what could be more public than the king going out to do battle? Plus, if he was lazy, why was he lazy then, when he had not been before? He certainly was not lazy when he marched out to do battle with Goliath. Laziness had not been a part of his story in the past. If lazy now, how come?

The Bible does not say why David lingered. It just tells a story in which lingering led to great sin. But perhaps this story gives us a chance to consider a danger facing any of us: that danger is spiritual sadness. That is, David might have lingered at home because he had lost his feel for the true value of things. He had lost his inner conviction that life mattered, that how he lived mattered, that whether or not he got up and went out to do battle was of any true importance. He might have lingered because he might have been blue. His spirits might have been low. He might have said to Joab, “You go. I will stay behind and consider large questions of strategy.” But he might have whispered to himself, “You go. I no longer care.”

Then, when he was strolling on his roof top, he spied a beautiful woman. And judging by his conduct then, not only did he see her, but he *had* to have her. He does not hesitate; he does not debate with himself. He simply plunges ahead as if compelled, as if driven by some demon.

Only, it might not have been a demon driving him. It might rather have been a step of desperation. He sees something that he imagines can make him feel alive again. Like a drowning man flinging his hand one last time toward the boat or a piece of debris, he plunges toward this beautiful woman his lingering has led him to see.

LUST OF THE EYE

In a recent article in *First Things*, theologian Reinhard Hütter suggests that the lust of the eye is “not a ‘hot’ but rather a ‘cold’ vice.” What might start off as joy, so that the one looking at pornography imagines that he or she is only delighting in the joys of God’s creation, turns old and cold, so that the person pages through the magazine or through the web pages, unsatisfied, drifting onwards toward losing a feel for the dignity of persons. Cause and effect become confused, but Hütter suspects that the habit of pornography is connected with a kind of spiritual sadness:

It arises from the roaming unrest of the spirit rooted in a spiritual apathy that, again, despairs of and eventually comes to resent the very transcendence in which the dignity of the human person has its roots. The lust of the eyes that feeds on internet pornography does not inflame but rather freezes the soul and the heart in a cold indifference to the human dignity of others and of oneself.⁴

⁴ “Pornography and Acedia,” *First Things*, April 2012.

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/03/pornography-and-acedia>

It is the old story: our heart and our conduct are intimately related, back and forth. Being low of heart can lead us into low conduct. And low conduct can make us blue. It can coarsen us. It can so mangle us that we are tempted along the path that David walked before us, to the suffering of everyone in sight.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

For someone who has fallen, either into sin or into sadness of heart, what is the way forward? Well, let me begin by lifting up a line from this past Sunday's Psalm -- Psalm 119, verse 9:

⁹How shall a young man cleanse his way?
[Or, how shall a young woman cleanse her way?]
By keeping to your words.

Notice that the Psalmist is not content with "learning" the words of the Lord. He means to go beyond admiring the words of the Lord, beyond meditating on them, to "keeping" them. The Psalm imagines that the "cleansing" of our way has much to do with how we walk in this world.

Jesus, for example, also separated himself from his fellows from time to time. David separated himself from his army, Jesus from his disciples. But Jesus did not coarsen his soul in the process. He withdrew, but not to engage in sin. And if he was awake at night, it was not because he wanted darkness to cover any dark deeds. Rather, he withdrew in order to pray:

²³And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:23, KJV)

The woman caught in adultery might have been a beautiful woman. Jesus might have found her so too, yet he continue to walk in the path of love and of truth. So he simply gives her a new lease on life:

¹⁰When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? ¹¹She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:10-11, KJV)

This is in full accord with what Jesus had taught in his Sermon on the Mount:

²⁷You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."
²⁸But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has

already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28, RSV)

JESUS IS A KING, BUT NOT SUCH AS DAVID HERE

I conclude, then, with two thoughts, both of which I find to be encouraging. First, though David had fallen into great sin, with the Lord there is forgiveness. Thanks to the ministry of the prophet Nathan, David came to the sudden understanding that “he is the man” -- he is the terrible sinner:

And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. (2 Samuel 12:7, KJV)

And if David had at one time suffered from sadness of spirit, there came a day when he could speak of a clean spirit again with confidence that the Lord was well able to supply what David prayed for:

⁸Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

⁹Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. (Psalm 51:8-12, KJV)

My final encouraging thought is simply this: We are about to enter upon the great events of Holy Week. There we shall see that the true King is not such a king as was David in his dealings with Bathsheba. He does not send innocent Uriah off to die. Just the reverse, he is the innocent one! And he sends himself off to die. He does it for you, for me. He is the great and true King of kings and Lord of lords, even our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.