

### *The Same Old Story*

We are going to spend a couple of weeks with Bathsheba and David.

And it's going to sound a lot like the *same old story*.

We will give David his due next week, and I'll try to be as generous to him as the Bible is, but this week, Bathsheba gets her say.

We have no idea how Bathsheba felt about Uriah the Hittite. The Bible doesn't tell us. We know she lamented his death.

Nor can we know how Bathsheba felt about David; details of their relationship do not probe how she felt about him after the whole sordid affair.

One should always seek to understand the feelings of others, but one ought not to tell others how they feel. As a twenty-first century, relatively privileged white man, I am very aware of what hubris it would be for me to assign feelings to a brown woman from thousands of years ago. So, I will not assign feelings to Bathsheba today beyond what the Bible tells us.

But I do think we have seen this story before: Power run amok at the expense of the powerless.

The midrashim of the Hebrew tradition suggest a few things that might shape how we should view this story: The rabbis do not impute guilt for the affair to Bathsheba. Indeed, the midrash enriches the story to capture nuance, adding that she was simply washing her hair in a bucket, out of sight, when David's lust shot an arrow at the bucket, splintering it, and leaving her revealed to his leering gaze.<sup>1</sup>

Bathsheba is largely exonerated for the affair in the eyes of the rabbinical teachings.

She, like so many, is a victim of the arrogance and greed of those more powerful.

That is truly the *same old story*. And it is a story of *sin*.

Let's consider the lessons that Bathsheba might teach us, beginning with the ways our sin affects others.

So often, the church's conversation about sin is an egotistical one.

We presume we are the center of God's attention for what we have done wrong, and by *we*, I mean *you*. (And me, of course.)

There is a reason that the closing sentences of many funerals include the line, "A sinner of God's own redeeming," as an appeal to the grace of God.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/bathsheba-midrash-and-aggadah>

We know we are a bunch of sinners, at least we ought to, because sin is ubiquitous.

And as we contemplate our own sin, truly a cheery topic for a summer Sunday, we tend to be focused on the affects to our salvation and our own lives.

Sometimes we deflect. Humor is a fine smokescreen for the things we have done.

“I have sinned,” we say, tongue firmly in cheek. Or we glibly let phrases like “Living in sin” tumble out of our lips without a thought to the deeper meaning of such words.

If we are directly challenged on our sins, we might turn to righteous indignation – as good a smokescreen, and frankly, a little more enjoyable as well. Who doesn’t get a charge out of working up a good head of steam from time to time?

Here’s how that looks, “I may have done x, y, or z, but don’t blame me for s, q, and r.”

That shouldn’t come as a surprise. Who among us wants to dwell on our worst moments?

But when we can no longer avoid coming face to face with our human limitations, there is one more danger, and it is one that a Christian of commitment cannot take seriously enough: That is that in claiming our sin, in taking ownership of it, we hijack the narrative of grace to suit our own purposes.

What do I mean by this?

I mean *self-justification*.

“I may have sinned, but here’s why. Consider the mitigating circumstances, O Lord.”

No. No. No.

It’s probably the most original of sin that our egotistical natures cause us to focus on the means of grace for ourselves when we contemplate our own wrongdoing.

How about a Biblical example of this?

“Against, you, and you alone have I sinned, O God.”

Now, tradition teaches us that this Psalm is King David’s prayer of contrition following the debacle his lust provoked. It is a powerful expression of remorse, one to which we return every Ash Wednesday as we begin the discipline of considering our sin.

It is a good starting point, but I’m pretty sure David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah also.

Our sin has victims in addition to ourselves, and in addition to our relationship with God.

Sin is like ink in the water, it goes everywhere.

Being honest with ourselves about the hurt we do to others is perhaps the hardest discipline of Christian faith.

Because God is the ultimate giver of grace, we may approach confession in certain reliance on God's love. Our pardon is assured before we even open our mouths, from our God who has made us and loves us.

Confessing our sin to others we have harmed may well seem a great deal harder.

That confession requires us to recognize our fault without the assurance of another's forgiveness.

Because forgiveness can only be given, never demanded.

The hardest confession is the one where we know that we have done wrong, and we are not assured of forgiveness.

But the ability to do so, to engage in such honesty and contrition is the mark of mature Christian discipleship, an indication we have moved beyond spiritual milk to something of substance.

If we can hear a word from Bathsheba today, perhaps it is on behalf of anyone we have wronged?

The fact of sin is unavoidable, and the simplest truth is that we sin in our best deeds as well as our worst.

To live in that depth of honesty with self and with others, and above all, with God, is develop into the fullness of what God redeemed humanity to experience.

Sometimes that happens dramatically, as though a switch has been thrown, a recognition that what we have thought or done was wrong.

Perhaps you've heard the story of Darryl Davis? He is a black blues musician who has made it his mission in life to help members of the Ku Klux Klan release themselves from their hatred through the act of *friendship*. Over thirty years, he has befriended over two hundred Klansmen, and helped them to give up their robes, many giving their robes *to* him in gratitude. He says, "If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves."<sup>2</sup>

When we learn better, we have to do better.

So often, though, the awareness of our sin, the awareness of the need to make restitution for what we have done comes more gradually, less dramatically.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robes>

And we shouldn't assume that will *just* happen.

We need to work toward it.

I love the way the letter to the Ephesians puts it: It is the strengthening of our *inner being*.

And like strengthening our bodies, it comes about with practice and exercise.

If I could offer a prayer for our church as we grapple with the enduring pandemic, and all that it means for our common life together, it would be that we might find the means to redevelop the muscle memory of faith that has perhaps been forgotten as we have been distant from one another, but is nonetheless vital to our spiritual health both as individuals and as a community.

By that I mean that whether in person here in the sanctuary, or virtually through online services, we must find that depth of community that enables our truest Christian selves to be the ones who are able to confess our sin, and to confess our faith.

So often, the awareness of our sin, the awareness of the need to make restitution for what we have done comes more gradually, less dramatically, than when the Klansmen hand over their hoods.

More often, it is a gradual awakening.

When that happens, it is sometimes because we have stacked the deck in favor of coming to such awareness, such self-knowledge.

We do that by *practice*.

The practices of faith are well known to us.

We practice faith by disciplining our worship – either by coming here, or by cultivating the habit of worship online, and following it up with personal interaction.

We practice faith by praying for our community – by name, and by affliction, in sorrow and in joy.

We practice faith by giving.

We practice faith by being honest.

And do you want to know the secret?

It's a million mundane things that make it happen.

Repetition of the acts of faith are what make it stick.

It's muscle memory.

That's one of the reasons we repeat things in worship a good bit. I know some of you former-Episcopalians like it when we do that. Don't deny it, I know who you are. I also know some of you like a little more variety on the creeds, and yes, I can see if you're muttering along.

But I can also see when a five-year-old is murmuring the words and starting to make them a part of herself.

We also get to see when a little boy, more exuberantly than anyone around him, exclaims, “In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven,” after our liturgist says, “Believe the good news of the Gospel.”

That’s when we’re strengthening something that will endure. There is perhaps no more humbling thing for a minister to do than to take communion to someone who has all but lost the ability to communicate, and in that moment while I’m repeating the Words of Institution over the bread and juice in her room, when we get the Lord’s Prayer, and she joins in. Her eyes light up. She is participating part of the worshipping community again, because she spent a lifetime strengthening her inner being.

All these repetitions are ways of strengthening your inner being, because when you need the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, you don’t need to be fumbling around your house to see if you can still find that Bible you got at confirmation – they need to be in your inner being.

I’ve heard this year that one of the acts of faith that you have missed the most, one that most fully strengthens many of us, has been *singing* the faith together.

Hymns become part of our inner being too, and they strengthen us. They have the capacity to convict us of our sin, but also to lift us to places of great joy.

Dave Davis tells the story of officiating a funeral for a dignitary who had a great fondness for Fannie Crosby hymns and when the congregation rose to sing, he could spot the members of his congregation mixed into the assembled body of funeral-goers because they were the ones who were singing with great gusto, claiming the promises the hymns proclaimed on behalf of the deceased. And he said, “That’s how I knew who *got* what we were doing that day.”

That’s the goal, isn’t it, for us to *get it*, to understand in our innermost selves who God wants us to be.

So, if there is a word from the Lord to speak to the unavoidable fact that our actions have consequences for others, it is to point us to the reality that God is working to redeem our best moments as well as our worst.

And to the extent we can participate in our own recovery, we can lay aside the ego that stands between ourselves and the ability to see God’s redemptive power.

And when that happens,

Our prayers unfold more naturally.

Our giving becomes more joyful.

The forgiving words of worship resonate more deeply in our being.

And when that happens,

Personal responsibility acknowledges the need for restoration.

Grace transforms.

Words heal.

Restoration brings *shalom*.

And the *same old story* becomes new again, as the ending is rewritten.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.