

“LOOKING LIFE IN THE EYE”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 25, 2021

based on 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Now, David “was ruddy with beautiful eyes.” He was the Johnny Depp of his day. Both his power and his good looks worked a number on everyone. In the first book of *Kings* in the Bible, you can read how he is remembered by history: “David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that [God] commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.” (1 Kings 15:5)

Uriah the who? Uriah the Hittite, a loyal soldier in David’s army. The unlucky husband of the beautiful Bathsheba, whom David took as his own without asking.

The story is one of the best told stories in the Bible. And it begins so artfully.

"In the Spring of the year when kings go out to war, David sent [his general], Joab, with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah Ammon. But David remained at Jerusalem. "

So, what is David doing hanging around Jerusalem?" Successful kings go to war in March or April every year. That’s how they remain kings.

I mean, look, that charming business about him being a shepherd boy may have a grain of truth in it, but really, David got to be a king the way most men got to be kings in the ancient world. By being very ambitious; willing to take huge personal risks; and by knowing how to exploit the weaknesses of the king before him.

David began as a warlord. Think of 12th century Japan. But his taste for battle was history by the time of this morning’s story. If you had asked him he would have told you, “More wars? Been there done that. I’m going to leave that to younger men.”

Frankly, he had peaked. He had established the borders of his country brilliantly and sustainably. Now all that was left to do was to keep reminding peoples like the Ammonites who lived on his Eastern border that he would not give an inch to them.

Now, if you want to understand what led to this morning’s troubles it was first and foremost David’s successes.

Alexander the Great, legend says, wept because he could find no more lands to conquer. Did he then go after women who were not his, like David? Because you know, David’s main kerfuffle is BOREDOM.

Bertrand Russell put it this way: "Unless a [person] has been taught what to do with success after getting it, the achievement of it must inevitably leave him a prey to boredom."

In his book, *THE EVERLASTING MAN*, another wise Brit, G.K Chesterton, wrote maybe the wisest words about boredom ever penned ...

"There comes an hour in the afternoon when the child is tired of pretending, when he is weary of being a robber or a cowboy, and it is then that he torments the cat. . . The effect of this staleness is the same everywhere. It is seen in all drug taking and dram drinking and in every form of the tendency to increase the dose. Men, women, seek stranger sins or more startling obscenities as stimulants to their jaded senses. . . . They try to stab their nerves to life as if it were with the knives of the priests of Baal. They are walking in their sleep and try to wake themselves up with nightmares."

David came up empty of purpose -- and you see what he chose to do in order to fulfill himself.

Leo Tolstoy called boredom, "The desire for desires."

Poor Bathsheba – she becomes the drug David uses to treat his boredom. Powerful men often feel entitled. They find a Jeffrey Epstein and take what they want. It's an appalling reality and little has changed with it. If we could only hear from Bathsheba, it would be instructive, but the only lines in the whole long story that come from her are these: "I'm pregnant." Abused women are not only ill-used, they are silenced.

And that's not the end of the story. If only it were. No, there follows a cover-up. There often is, and it often leads to something worse than the original sin. David tries to settle his paternity suit in a clever, secret way, by getting Uriah to come home from the war and sleep with his wife. He sends for his general, sits him down in his office and, feigning interest, asks how the action at the front is going. It's all very friendly. He even gets the man drunk.

But look, even drunk, Uriah does not return home when he leaves the king. Instead he makes his bed in the open air in front of the palace door so that everyone in Jerusalem can see that he refuses to take anything for himself that his men, exposed, and in the line of fire, can't have. You want an example of integrity in leadership? Are you hungry for that? You need look no further.

Why David doesn't just acknowledge his responsibility and make the best of it for the sake of his child, and Bathsheba and her husband, his talented General, Uriah, is a mystery.

"In the morning, after Uriah had packed up his bed-roll and eaten his simple breakfast, David wrote a letter to his commanding general, Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah

[himself]. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

We should pause a moment to take in the weight of the betrayal that is wrought here in the actions of the king – a man who believes he is above the law. There is something about total power that hypnotizes the bearer of it, that leads an autocrat to believe that laws are written for others, not for him.

In the next week we are likely to hear testimony about the January 6th insurrection from a 21st century Joab who chose NOT to do the appalling thing his president ordered him to do. I'm speaking of the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley. It may turn out to be even more damning than the awful story this morning about David. General Milley may well be remembered as the one bulwark that kept us from losing our democracy.

Once again, the story does not end here, though David wished that it had.

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son . . . But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD,

And, as one preacher (Barbara Brown Taylor) puts it, "Before the baby could make a fist," Nathan, David's personal prophet, was knocking at the palace door.

"He did not come storming in, hot as a firecracker. No, he decided to work slantwise. Get the king off-balance, make the king into his own prosecutor. It was a stroke of minor genius."

He could have condemned the king outright. People, self-righteous people, who see life as black-and white, do this all the time. But Nathan took no joy in bringing down a king. He was after bigger fish. He wanted to change this king's life, for his sake and for the sake of the kingdom. He wanted to retrieve the king's conscience that had gone down a deep dark rat hole.

Here was an opportunity to restore vigor and purpose to a leader who had begun to go to rot. It called for Nathan to make a cocktail of guile and restraint. It would require a very light touch and a lot of imagination. So he told David a story.

Now there was this rich man who had an abundance of flocks and herds. And there was this poor man who had next to nothing. Well, he had one little ewe lamb he had bought with money he had earned by doing odd jobs for old ladies who couldn't pay him very much. He brought it up himself, and it grew up with his children. He called it "Flossy"

and he fed it from his own hand. He even let it drink from his own cup, and at night it slept with him and his wife. It was like a daughter to him.

And when David heard the part about how the rich man stole that sweet lamb and cooked it for his friends, when he had hundreds of animals of his own to spare, David could not contain himself. He pronounced a death sentence on that man for what he had done.

And it was then that Nathan held up to the king a mirror and said, "You are the man."

And with that, David's sense of himself turned to ashes before the prophet's eyes. He felt like his life was over. He was finished, but Nathan quickly let him know that, no, a new chapter in his life had just begun. His purpose was not finished. He had miles to go and chapters to write and another child to father, years on, with Uriah's wife, no less, and that child, Solomon, would rule Israel after him for forty years.

It's so interesting what comes from the things we do in the dark.

There would be consequences, of course. But David's death would not be one of them, though I imagine he had wished, in that moment, looking squarely in the eyes of Nathan, that a hole would have opened under him and the earth would have swallowed him up alive.

The child he had fathered would die like half of the children of his day, before the baby was old enough to be weaned. This is, in fact, the hardest part of the story for us – that a child would die for his father's sin, and I will tell you straight out that I have no idea of how to even begin to explain that.

But there are boundaries in this life and trouble for those who wander past them and for those who are connected to the ones who wander, besides. It's simply the natural course for unnatural actions.

Physical actions and moral actions both have consequences. Throw a rock into a lake and watch the ripples that come from it go every direction. Conceive a child, try to pawn it off on another man, then make the child's mother a widow and the child will suffer for that, every time.

Why? Because we are all connected. Relationships are joined in webs. Touch one part, the whole thing vibrates for good and for bad and everyone feels it. It's the price of the freedom that God has woven into the web of our lives.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "When we exercise our freedom in life-giving ways, even the trees clap their hands. And when we exercise it in death-dealing ways, the earth quakes beneath our feet. None of us is morally autonomous."

And when we discover this as individuals, as a community, as a nation, God does not turn away from us. God sends various “prophets” like Nathan to wake us up, to tell us stories so we can remember who we really are.

That’s why I usually include stories in my sermons, to hold up a mirror for us all to see ourselves.

A woman named Martha Beck’s has a blog called, “You Spot It, You Got It.”

The idea is this: if you spot a weakness in some else’s character, it may very well be because you have that in yourself, though you may be unable to see it there. Here’s how she puts it.

“My friend is lazy, willful, and self-absorbed. Wait—could that actually be me I’m talking about?” We’re talking here about projection.

Michael Caine plays a wonderful hypocrite in the epically low comedy film, *Goldmember*. At one point he says, "There are two kinds of people I can't stand - Those who are intolerant of other cultures, and the Dutch."

Well, what you dislike most in me may actually be what you most dislike in yourself. Which makes me wonder what shadow or wound lay deep inside Nathan that allowed him to see what was hidden deep inside his king. Consider that for a moment.

When, I wonder, had someone said to Nathan the words, “You are the man”? Perhaps you hadn’t thought of that.

A lot of times when we mess up in life we tend to think we are the only one who ever did such a thing. If we go on, beating ourselves up for the rest of our lives, well, that’s a huge mistake. Doing that is no better than whatever we did that made us ashamed of ourselves in the first place.

But if we can realize that, like everyone else, we are only human, that can make a huge difference.

I imagine that when David heard those words from Nathan, it was like being split in two. But, you know, the moment we find out how culpable we are can be a gift. With that revelation comes an opportunity for us to accept ourselves, flawed though we are.

Was David a good man or a bad man? Silly question; he was both. Life is complicated. You and I are complicated. Like David, we, too, rationalize our choices and actions. We do this all the time,

But, you know, from time to time in life, if we are paying attention, we *all* hear the words: “You are the man.” Maybe we watch a movie, and boom! we see ourselves, if only for a moment, in a character that is just as human as we are. Just as flawed. We identify with him or her, and it’s a little bit painful, or it’s very painful, but in the end, it’s a good thing.

Maturing in life is all about coming to realize we can accept such truths about ourselves, we can, in fact, survive such moments, and go on.

In time we may find we don’t even need a Nathan. We can recognize our own hypocrisy. We can say those words, “I am the man,” to ourselves when we need to. Thank God for that.

Amen