

WHAT MAKES A KING GREAT?

(01/26/2025)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 11:1-27; 12:1-18
Matthew 7:1-5

“Nathan said to King David, ‘You are the man!’” (2 Samuel 12:7)

“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7:5)

This past week I found myself thinking of King David. David has always been one of my favorite biblical characters. When I was born, my father prevailed upon my mother to name me Paul after the apostle Paul, and David after King David, instead of some of my relatives in Canada. So, I have always felt an affinity with these two biblical giants. Neither of them was perfect. Neither was a saint. But each made his mark upon our evolving understanding of God and our understanding of our own psyche.

At the time of our scripture lesson from 2 Samuel, things were going pretty well in the nation of Israel. The two kingdoms, Israel (or Ephraim) in the north and Judah in the south, had united under Saul, and David, the former shepherd boy who had become a great military leader and who succeeded Saul, had been anointed king of all Israel. Jerusalem, which was formerly the capital of Judah, was made the capital of the United Kingdom. In one of his first acts as king, David brought the Ark of God, the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

God made a covenant with David. In 2 Samuel 7:8-11, we read that Nathan, the prophet, conveyed to David what God had said to him:

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Yes, things were going pretty well for Israel, and also for David. Not only his lineage but also his fame was ensured: “and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.” Apparently, this matter of fame, of making a name for oneself, of ensuring one’s

place in history, is really important to some national leaders. However, when their successes and fame become more important than their call to serve their people, they have a more than marginal propensity to abuse the power that has been entrusted to them.

The line from Nathan's speech that David should have taken to heart was the first line: "Go and tell my servant David." As the leader of all Israel, David should have remembered (1) that he was God's servant; (2) that he had become king by the grace of God; and (3) that God had called him to serve his people, Israel. When national leaders lose their grounding in that God who created them and who called them to be a leader of their people, called them to take on a sacred trust, called them to serve their people, they lose their true identity, and their actions become increasingly directed toward meeting their own egocentric and neurotic needs. This is why our incoming president, during the inauguration ceremony, places his/her left hand on the Bible as he/she takes the oath of office.

To his credit, at first David remembered his humble beginnings as a little shepherd boy in the house of his father, Jesse. In 2 Samuel 7, we read:

David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, 'Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? . . . Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. Therefore, you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you . . . Thus, your name will be magnified forever in the saying, 'The Lord of hosts is God over Israel'; and the house of your servant David will be established before you.

At this point, David remembered who he was, and he gave the glory to God. When national leaders lose touch with the virtue of humility, when they give the glory to themselves, they betray their sacred trust.

David then embarks upon a series of military conquests. He defeats the Philistines. He conquers the Moabites and enslaves the entire nation. He defeats the Arameans and the Ammonites. He slaughters eighteen thousand Edomites and enslaves all those who survive. In 2 Samuel 8 we read that, "David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people." Then the author notes, "David made a name for himself."

"David made a name for himself." I guess. There is nothing like a few successes to make a national ruler susceptible to inflation. However, as Proverbs 16:18 tells us, "Pride goes before a fall." It seems that fame and fortune, the heady feeling of success leads to inflation, to a preoccupation with one's persona, with one's image, with the inevitable effect of making one more susceptible to the intrusion or eruption of the shadow, to the dark side of power, and to the abuse of the public trust.

As we heard this morning, David committed adultery with Bathsheba. I am not sure whether David was technically married at the time, since at that time kings often had several wives or concubines. However, it is clear that Bathsheba was married; she was married to Uriah. In ancient Israel, the family was sacred. You didn't break up families. This was the religious and secular law to which David should have held himself accountable.

There is a lengthy history of kings, czars, emperors, presidents, and other national leaders declaring themselves above the law. I'm sure we can think of examples. From ancient times it was commonly believed that kings were appointed or anointed by God. By the way, the king, understandably, did nothing to dissuade this line of thought. As God's chosen, the king believed he had a right to do whatever he wanted. He was either above the law or the law that applied to the people of his realm simply did not apply to him.

If the king is a good king, then the kingdom flourishes. If the king is a bad king, if he is too concerned with his own aggrandizement (as, for example, with the French monarchy before the French Revolution or the Russian czars before the Russian Revolution), the palaces become increasingly opulent while the people go hungry. If the king is too concerned with power and world domination (as, for example, with the Emperor Napoleon in France or Hitler in Germany), he will build a military machine that will ultimately prove to be the destruction of both his enemies and his own people. If the king is too concerned with his own image and with meeting his own needs through the use or abuse of his power, he will hurt his people and lose their respect.

When David saw Bathsheba bathing, he fell in love at first sight. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he fell in lust at first sight. When you really love someone, you don't intentionally hurt her. David summoned Bathsheba to his palace where, that very day, he had sexual relations with her. Shortly after their brief assignation, Bathsheba sent word to David that she was pregnant with his child. Incidentally, the reason she knew David was the father of the child was that Uriah, in obedience to the requirement of abstinence during a time of war, slept outside the door of the king's house and did not go down to his own house, even when David got him drunk, hoping he would. Uriah was truly a loyal and faithful soldier.

It is interesting that in various parts of the Bible (I Chronicles 20:1-3) the writer does not mention David's sinful behavior with Bathsheba, and that in others (I Samuel 13:14) the writer glosses over it. People who believe in a narcissistic king and trust that he will bring prosperity to the land have functioned as enablers since the beginning of time. They seek to maintain the king's image because this is a high priority for a narcissistic king. The problem with this sort of rationalization by the king and denial by his loyal followers, who are probably afraid that their dissent would lead to imprisonment or worse, is that it does not lead the king to own his own

shadow; it does not lead him to the kind of self-reflection and repentance that gives rise to spiritual or psychological growth.

David not only abuses the power of his office by taking another man's wife; he compounds the sin by betraying his loyal soldier, Uriah. According to custom in ancient Israel, if Bathsheba were a widow, David could take her into his palace as his wife. So, to solve this problem, David decides to make Bathsheba a widow. He sends Uriah back to the battlefield with the instructions that Joab should "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (2 Samuel 11:15). Joab then betrays *his* calling, the trust of his soldiers, by blindly following David's instructions. By going so close to the wall of the city they were besieging in the effort to set Uriah up, many other valiant Israelites are needlessly killed.

When he hears of the loss of so many of his men, David's response is alarmingly casual. He tells Joab, "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city and overthrow it." No big deal. Let's just get on with the business of running the country, of fighting the great battles and vanquishing the enemies. A few brave men needlessly lost are nothing to lose sleep over. Such is the power of rationalization. As soon as Bathsheba's period of mourning has passed, David "sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son."

There are many ways to abuse power. David lost touch with his call to be the religious as well as the military leader of his people. He forgot he was called to serve as well as to lead. He broke the laws of the land and violated his own moral code.

In his defense, David apparently didn't realize how far out of line his behavior had become. What was missing in David was a reflective aspect or function to his psyche, what a twelve-step program would call the ability and willingness to undertake a fearless and searching moral inventory. When people are not reflective, when they have no interior life, they run up against the consequences of their sins only when things fall apart. Even then, they usually whine and complain that it is not their fault, that they are not perpetrators but victims.

Many people, perhaps most people, don't want to look at their shadow, their own dark side. They would rather operate out of the illusion that their motives are pure, that they are always in the right, and they prefer that others see them this way. With people who realize that psychological and spiritual growth comes from facing and incorporating the shadow, a person who is able to play the role that Nathan played with David suddenly appears.

In a good marriage, one's spouse can play this role. In the court of the king, the jester or fool often played this role. I mentioned this last week in my reference to Edward Rowland Sill's

poem, "The Fool's Prayer." A psychotherapist can help you come to terms with what you need to do to grow, though many people simply come to therapy to complain about other people, about how other people aren't living up to their expectations. The minister has historically played this role for his/her congregation, though I'm not sure all parishioners want the minister to be honest, to confront them with their own dark side and the way they hurt others. Many people, perhaps most people, don't want to look at their shadow, their own dark side.

What made David a great leader, a great king was not that he was perfect. David was no saint! He had a shadow side. He violated his own moral code, and he broke the law of his land. But when Nathan held up a mirror to him, showing him how despicable his behavior had been, David said to Nathan, "I have sinned before the Lord." David truly repented for what he had done. This is how David became a spiritual as well as a military giant.

In keeping with the *lex talionis*, the law of exact retribution, "an eye for an eye," David should have died for having taken Uriah's life. However, God spared David's life. God's divine judgment rather fell upon the child of David and Bathsheba. We read, "The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill. David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground." But God killed the child.

That's right--God killed the child. And that's right--what God did wasn't fair. Bathsheba lost both her husband and her child. It isn't fair when the sins of the father fall upon the children. Passages like these make me wonder if Yahweh, the God of Israel, is really the same god as the god that Jesus reveals to us.

Is there a happy ending to the story of King David? If there is, I believe it is the message that redemption is possible, that healing is possible--for individuals, for families, and for a nation. David and Bathsheba have a second son, Solomon, who becomes a great and wise king over Israel and who, twenty-eight generations later, becomes an integral part of the line that leads to Jesus. So out of this dark episode in the life of King David, comes new life.

I pray that our President and all the leaders of the world will set aside the soul sickness of egocentrism, of narcissism, and their desire for limitless power that they might embrace their sacred calling to empower their people, to create the kind of conditions where all the people, *all the people* of their realm can flourish, and to care for the environment, the world that we are leaving to our children and grandchildren. I pray that their focus will be not on the rich and powerful, on the creation of an oligarchy, but on the weak and vulnerable, those who have been disenfranchised, those who have been left behind by the ascendance of imperialistic capitalism or other forms of economic systems that oppress or exploit rather than serve the people.

If this is to happen, someone will need to have the courage that Nathan had in holding up a mirror to David and in telling David, “You are the man.” This may happen through honest dissent by the leader’s advisors, through the light cast on issues by the loyal opposition party, through public demonstrations, through the media, and through people speaking out, not only writers, artists, poets, pastors, and celebrities but each and every one of us when we encounter a situation where our basic human rights or the basic human rights of one of our brothers and sisters has been denied or violated.

I pray that our President and all the leaders of the world will become capable of the kind of genuine self-reflection, repentance, and humility that made David such a great king so many years ago.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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January 26, 2025*