

An Imperfect Hero  
2 Samuel 11:1-18, 26-27  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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So, what do we do with a text like the one we heard today? Throughout scripture we hear King David lauded as a chosen one of God...mentioned in genealogies including that of Jesus...held up as the greatest of the kings of Israel. And yet in today's passage we are reminded that he was not without flaws. While scripture treats him as a hero, scripture also reminds us of his imperfections.

But often the commitment to viewing him as a hero is stronger. So, if we aren't careful we can fall too quickly into a habit of saying, "Well, David wasn't perfect...but which of us is?" or "David may have made some mistakes, but he was the chosen one of God so those mistakes must have served a purpose." We can fall too quickly into the habit of sweeping his sins under the rug and only focusing on the positives. And yet, we are given these stories. So, perhaps we should spend some time with them.

So, as we continue this work of looking again and reading again these challenging passages from the Bible...as we continue to let scripture be a starting place for conversation...let's look again at what we find here.

Today's reading begins, "in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle..."<sup>1</sup> What is interesting is that we rarely even pause here. We often treat beginnings of passages where scenes are set as unnecessary information. And yet it is worth noting that the text says, "the time when kings go out to battle." We may read that as if it really means nations go out to battle and yet we must remember that in their time and place, one of the primary roles

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 11:1a, NRSV.

of the king was as that of military leader. We certainly saw this with Saul's reign and David was introduced to us in many ways, but one of which was military. There are many stories about David that involve him being in the midst of battle. And yet for some unexplained reason, this time, David was at home while his troops were out fighting. It is hard to know for sure if this detail plays a big role, but what we do know is that David was not out with the rest of the troops, and while at home, he got himself in trouble.

In his down time, David was out on the roof, seemingly surveying his kingdom when something, or more accurately, someone caught his eye. It was Bathsheba who was cleansing herself, as was the custom. Upon seeing her, David initiated an encounter with her. And this is another important time to pause with this scripture and to remind ourselves of what we have heard, and what the scripture actually tells us. See, all too often Bathsheba has been treated as a temptress, as if she was intentionally bathing in order to get David's attention. All too often Bathsheba is treated as the one who did something wrong. And yet, scripture is clear throughout this story that Bathsheba was simply doing what was expected of her and that their encounter was at the initiation of David, the king. In fact, the only thing Bathsheba initiates is one communication – the one telling David that a child has been conceived. And, because – as is often the case – Bathsheba, like other female characters, has little voice, we never hear her thoughts about this encounter. We don't hear if she was willing...if she was forced. We hear nothing of her feelings about what happened. Instead our story focuses on the one with the power.

When we hear the name King David, if we know anything at all, we typically only think of his early stories – as a young boy defeating Goliath or as a musician calming King Saul – or we think of the stories and legacy of his greatness. But, when we pay attention to the passage we

heard today what we remember is that scripture also tells us of a different side. Not only did David see a beautiful woman and use his power to seduce her, but when things didn't go as planned, when he felt like he was about to be caught, rather than coming clean, David multiplied his sins by murdering her husband.

Yes, the king who is lauded as the greatest king had a shadow side. In addition to all of his good deeds...in addition to the special relationship he had with God...in addition to his faithfulness...he was also an adulterer and a murderer.

And it is important to remember that while the Bible largely celebrates and applauds King David it also doesn't hide these stories. Alongside the best of who David was, the realities of his sinful actions are also told. And this is so important. All too often we act as if things must be black and white...in this case as if people are either good or bad, angelic or evil. But David's story as a whole reminds us of the complexity of people and this story reminds us that it is important to be honest about our sins and our shadow side.

Because this isn't only a thing of the past. In reading this, we are reminded that we need to hold accountable especially those who are in power – whether that is the King Davids of 1000's of years ago or the King Davids of 2018. When power abuses other people, when power takes advantage of those with less power, and certainly when power acts in sexually violent or manipulative ways toward others, we need to take note of that.

If we kept reading we would find that David was held accountable. In chapter 12, Nathan the prophet came to David. Nathan was aware of what David had done and, realizing that David was hiding it, Nathan told him a story. The story was of a rich man who stole a poor man's lamb. David heard the story and was infuriated – how could someone take such advantage of

another? And it was then, in the climax of this encounter that Nathan says, “You are the man!”<sup>2</sup> And with that David not only finally confesses, but the consequences of his action are announced.

There is much about this story that is complex. But one of the first things we realize is that we are imperfect people. And so, the challenge is to hold accountable those who misuse power, those who harm others...while still not reducing anyone to their worst sin. As soon as we reduce people to their worst sin, as soon as that becomes the only story we tell, as soon as their sin becomes all that we know about a person, then it causes us to hide our own sins more deeply. It causes us to push the skeletons further back in our closet, to be less willing to admit our own sins, our own mistakes.

And so, in addition to reading this story and being honest about the complexity of who David was...in addition to reading this story and being honest about the vulnerability and lack of power that were part of Bathsheba’s reality...in addition to these, we learn something for ourselves today.

We learn that we both need to hold people accountable and we also need to create communities in which it is safe to confess. In this story when Nathan set out to hold David accountable it was easy for David to see the sins of someone else even as he was hiding his own. And it wasn’t until Nathan told that story – about the rich man who took from the poor man...it wasn’t until Nathan pointed out that David was that man – that David could finally come clean.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7a, NRSV.

It has long been said that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners. And yet, we don't act like it. We don't trust that there are safe places, that the church is a safe place.

But I wonder...I wonder what would happen in the church, in the world, if we actually created safe places for people to confess their sins, to confess their temptations, to talk about the shadow sides of themselves even before they acted on them. What if David had had a safe person to speak to ahead of time who could have called him back to his better self, who could have reminded him that his power was meant for the good of the people not for his own personal advantage and certainly not to be used to take from someone else what wasn't his to take? How would this story have been different? And how can we create a different story?

In the era of the Me Too Movement...in a time when we watch as young black men are both incarcerated and shot at a rate that far exceeds their crimes...in a time when politicians create their own realities and seem far more likely to vilify their enemies even while hiding their own sin...in the midst of all of this, how do we create a world where we learn again, or for the first time, how to use power for the good of the community rather than for our own gain and in ways that corrupt.

No hero is perfect. All humans are complex. But what would happen if we created spaces in which we were able to be honest about our temptation and sin? What would happen if we created spaces in which the vulnerable among us didn't have to worry under the threat of the powerful? What would happen if we created spaces in which consequences mattered even as our sins didn't separate us from the community?

This story of David can be read through quickly and dismissed. We can shift our attention back to the pedestal upon which Judeo-Christian tradition often keeps him. Or this

story, this memory, can open up the conversation for us about how we work together to shape our world so that power works on behalf of all, including the least...this story can open up the conversation about how we create communities where sin is talked about, where sin is forgiven, where people are more than their worst mistake...this story can open up the conversation about how we manage power rather than being consumed by it...about how we create healing communities of safety and care.

Our world would be better if we were willing to talk honestly about the sins of the powerful and the often horrific impact on the vulnerable. This story gives us a place to begin as we acknowledge David's sin even alongside history's admiration for him. This story gives us a place to begin as we acknowledge Bathsheba as a victim – one whose voice was silenced by the powerful. This story gives us a place to begin as we commit to create communities of safety, of honesty, and of accountability.

May it be so.