

**July 28, 2024**

**2 Samuel 11:1-15**

**Sermon Title: Absolute Power**

*In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.*

*<sup>2</sup> It happened, late one afternoon when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. <sup>3</sup> David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." <sup>4</sup> So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. <sup>5</sup> The woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."*

*<sup>6</sup> So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. <sup>7</sup> When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared and how the war was going. <sup>8</sup> Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. <sup>9</sup> But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord and did not go down to his house. <sup>10</sup> When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" <sup>11</sup> Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." <sup>12</sup> Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, <sup>13</sup> David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk, and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.*

*<sup>14</sup> In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. <sup>15</sup> 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."*

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

It was the English historian Lord Acton who penned the famous quote, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The context of this quote is Acton's question to a Bishop of how religious historians should handle the corrupt and even

criminal behavior of many Popes, and the appalling treatment of so-called dissidents and heretics during the Inquisition.<sup>1</sup> Too often the recorded history of so-called “great people” and “great nations” speaks only of the victories and accomplishments and is whitewashed of all wrongdoing. Acton is basically asking, “What history do we write?” This question is especially relevant in the political battles being fought today. To speak of slavery and colonialism and racism is seen as unpatriotic and ungrateful in the minds of some Americans while others think it is crucial for rooting out institutional injustice. What history and whose history matters?

King David was heralded as a great man with a “heart for God.” And yet, as his story is told his gross abuse of power and lack of moral character is not whitewashed from Biblical history. It is right there, in this awful story from the Book of Samuel, and we are left to wrestle with why. Why do we need to know this?

I keep hearing the elders of the tribes of Israel pleading to Samuel for a king...a story we visited a few weeks ago. They wanted a king to protect their borders. They wanted to be great like other nations. They wanted a strong military and a king that would go before them into battle. Begrudgingly, Samuel takes their request to God. It’s not what God wants, but God knows they won’t relent. “Give them what they want,” is God’s response, “But let them know what to expect with a king.”

Samuel returned to the people and explained to them the ways of kings. They take, and take, and take, and take. They take your sons for battle and your daughters for servants. They take your land, your livestock, and tax you no end to support their kingly desires for power and wealth and eventually enslave you in debt and poverty. If you want to trade your freedom for security – so be it.

They take and take and take...and that is exactly what King David does. The great David becomes a king that takes. Throughout the story David is contrasted with his own loyal soldier, Uriah the Hittite. David, the king who is supposed to be leading his troops into battle, is instead at home lounging in his palace while Uriah is on the front lines for David. David takes Uriah’s wife and when she becomes pregnant, David concocts a scheme to cover it up by getting Uriah back to sleep with his wife. Uriah, so full of integrity, cannot allow himself that pleasure while his own men are on the battle front. David even gets him drunk and he can’t corrupt Uriah. Spiraling further into depravity, David writes an order, which Uriah carries back to his commander, guaranteeing Uriah’s death on the front lines.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/lord-acton-writes-to-bishop-creighton-that-the-same-moral-standards-should-be-applied-to-all-men-political-and-religious-leaders-included-especially-since-power-tends-to-corrupt-and-absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely-1887>

First David takes Uriah's wife, then he takes Uriah's life.

One man in this story, who's not even an Israelite, has great integrity. And David, the great king, has none. I can hear Samuel off in the distance shouting, "I told you so!"

Not every story in the Bible is a "go and do likewise" story. Perhaps the writer of this story is plagued by the same question as Lord Acton. How should David's story be told? Perhaps this story is a cautionary tale. Or maybe it helps to explain all those years later why everything ultimately fell apart. We don't know. We are simply left to wrestle with it. There are no easy answers.

And we should wrestle with it – especially as people who believe all people are beloved and created in the image of God. We should wrestle with the fact that Bathsheba is nothing more than property in this story. We should wrestle with the fact that she is taken by force and assaulted. We should wrestle with the fact that David had minions who never questioned his orders to "get" a woman for him or to "get" her husband killed.

They were just following orders is one way to look at it. Was saying, "No!" an option? Why don't you ask Shiphrah and Puah? When Pharaoh gave these two midwives an order to kill the boy babies of the Hebrew slaves, these two women found a way to say, "No!" They got creative. Don't tell me, "I was just following orders."

Shiphrah and Puah are celebrated as heroes by scripture – but Bathsheba, as we shall see, is a non-person. She is property. She is victimized. She is widowed. She is forced to bear a child destined to die, and yet, this story has nothing to do with her. Her rape is not David's big sin, his dishonoring of another man is. When David's sin is exposed, and what he has done overwhelms him, Bathsheba is not his concern.

Bathsheba is a victim, not just of David, but of patriarchy. When you are a woman in a patriarchal culture you are property. You have no voice, no agency, and your identity is attached to men. And because ancient culture was patriarchal, the Old Testament has stories that seemingly condone things like rape, sexual slavery (aka concubines), and the use and dismissal of women. The scholar Phyllis Tribble called them "Texts of Terror" in her book by the same name. These stories give us plenty to wrestle with...and wrestle we must.

We, the reader, are left with the task of humanizing Bathsheba – because the Bible doesn't do it for us. And yet, what too often happens is that Bathsheba, rather than being humanized, is demonized. She is called a seductress and accused of luring

David into an adulterous act. Five hundred years ago, the great reformer, Martin Luther blamed Bathsheba for causing David to stumble, and I quote, “over a couple of pigtailed.” He then went on and called Bathsheba a “domestic enemy, the house devil with her beautiful face and her smooth tongue.”<sup>2</sup> That’s how you demonize someone and the countless others who share the experience.

Once again, the victim is blamed for what she was wearing or not wearing, her beauty, and her location all in attempt to make David appear to be a vulnerable male. But the story suggests no such thing. David is on his roof, in the night, towering over the homes around him. He has a privileged vantage point. Bathsheba is simply taking a bath, to purify herself after her period. David had a choice to look away – but he doesn’t. Instead, he sends his servants to get her and take her. When she went with them did she know what was going to happen? Likely not. She was taken to the king. David is responsible for what happens next. Did she have any choice? If you are not convinced that the power differential alone makes this assault, I can send you articles about the specific Hebrew words used in this story that suggest force, not mutuality.<sup>3</sup>

In the story, she is treated as a commodity to be taken by someone abusing his power.

What we can do with this story is to stop and honor her humanity. We can see Bathsheba as a beloved child of God, created in the image of God. We can refuse the rumors and assumptions and see this for what it is. We can consider her pain, her life, her future. We can empathize with her and have compassion.

We can do the same for all those who have been diminished in the pages of history. We can search out the other history, the history written by the victims of assault, and patriarchy, and genocide, and enslavement, and colonialism. We can humanize those who have been demonized. We can have compassion.

It is interesting to me that the gospel reading for this Sunday is the story of Jesus feeding the large crowd from the gospel of John. All four gospels have a version of this story. Rather than blaming the people for being ill-prepared, Jesus has compassion on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://almostheretical.com/yes-david-raped-bathsheba-part-1/>

<sup>3</sup> Gravett, Sandie. 2004. “Reading ‘Rape’ in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (3): 279–99.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001394390&site=ehost-live>.

Andruska JL. “Rape” in the Syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2024 Jul 28];129(1):103–9. Available from:

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIBCB170410000168&site=ehost-live>

them. Jesus takes the small amount of food he has, he blesses it, he breaks it, and he gives it. We say this every Sunday at the table. And everyone is fed.

In John's version of the story of the feeding of the 5000 there is a curious verse at the end of the story. In John 6:15 it says: "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." The kind of king and kingdom they want is the kind that takes and breaks. That's not Jesus.

David takes and breaks. Jesus blesses and gives. David abuses his power. Jesus uses his power.

Lord Acton had every reason to say what he said about absolute power corrupting absolutely given the history he was trying to record. But power doesn't always corrupt. Power can be used for good. Power can be used to promote social justice, environmental protection, and scientific advancement. Power can be used for healing and feeding and lifting people up and protecting the most vulnerable when used by people with a moral compass like Jesus – when used by people who value compassion over power.

As we wrestle with the difficult history of David we use it as an opportunity for a little self-reflection:

Do we use or abuse our power and privilege?

Do we demonize or humanize?

Do we take and break or do we bless and give?

What will the history books say about us?