**10 Pentecost**

**August 2, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Last week I was prepared to preach on the story of David and Bathsheba … but a muse got in the way. So I promised I would preach about David and Bathsheba … and the prophet Nathan … this Sunday. A number of you actually mentioned it to me this week … I just hope it lives up to your expectations.

The story of David and Bathsheba … and now the prophet Nathan. It is a good legend … but at its heart is the bigger story of the power of God’s redemption to bring new life to all of us. This is a story about redemption … not just for David, but for you and me as well.

David and Bathsheba: David the shepherd boy, who slew Goliath with a single fling of a smooth stone, who rose to become a mighty warrior, commander of armies, and finally king over Israel … David was at home in his palace lounging around while his next door neighbor, Uriah the Hittite, was leading David’s army in battle.

David looked over the rooftop wall of his palace and noticed a beautiful woman bathing on the rooftop below his. He summoned his servants to fetch her … they “lay together” … and then she went home. Sometime later she sends word to David that she is pregnant.

Am I the only one who finds this story a little fishy? Uriah the Hittite is an officer in David’s army, and he lives right next door to the palace. The story makes it seem that David’s sighting of Bathsheba bathing was his very first awareness of her existence. Somehow, I find that hard to believe. I wonder if David may have seen Bathsheba many times before, became smitten with her, and then sent Uriah into battle just to have an opportunity to seduce her while her husband was away.

And Bathsheba? I wonder if she is totally innocent in all this. If David’s sighting of Bathsheba from his rooftop was his first, was it one that was planned by Bathsheba? She knew well that her next door neighbor was King David and that he was at home while her husband was away fighting the war with the Ammonites.

These lurid questions are the making of tabloid headlines in the checkout lanes at Publix. It sounds all too much like the affairs of public figures in every age, including our own. Yet the fact of the matter is that the questions raised in the story of David and Bathsheba are not just fodder for sensational speculation … these questions are also ones scholars of Hebrew lore take very seriously.

Was this a romance initiated by David’s lust? Or is this a story of a coy woman’s manipulation for the sake of power? The fact of the matter is that this is one of those stories that can be read many, many ways … and they may all be true.

And just to flesh out the story … no pun intended … when David gets word that Bathsheba is pregnant a cover-up ensues. He calls Bathsheba’s husband and David’s officer, Uriah, home from the front lines so that Uriah might “lay” with Bathsheba and then Uriah would believe that the child was his. But Uriah is a man of honor, and while his troops are fighting the war he chose to refrain from those activities his men are deprived of … including sex with his wife. David even tried to get Uriah drunk so that his inhibitions might be lowered and he would succumb to the beauty of his wife Bathsheba. But even that doesn’t work. So he resorted to a final solution … he sent word to his general Boaz … by way of the innocent Uriah … to send Uriah into battle and withdraw the soldiers around him so that Uriah would be killed by the enemy.

That is the story of David and Bathsheba that we heard read last week, but like a good novel it left us hanging for the beginning of the next chapter. In this week’s reading we heard that after an appropriate time of grieving, Bathsheba and David marry. But remember, David already has other wives, and a consort of concubines as well. And the charming and charmed wonder boy of Israel has tarnished his image, and the repercussions of his acts bring cracks to his household.

Those cracks begin when the prophet Nathan confronted King David by telling him a parable … a parable that snares David in his owns words to hold him accountable for his actions. When David acknowledged to himself what he has done he hung his head in shame. “I have sinned against the Lord,” he says, and David lived with the guilt and a broken household until his death. The consequences of his actions are tragic. When Bathsheba gave birth to her son conceived in adultery, the child only lived for a few days. And then David’s adult son Absalom, by his wife Haggith, is killed when the mule he is riding in retreat from a battle runs under a low hanging tree and Absalom’s neck is caught in a forked branch.

Another of David’s sons, Adonijah, by his wife Maacah, is the rightful heir to the throne. But on David’s deathbed Bathsheba pleads with David to renounce Adonijah and proclaim Bathsheba’s second son, Solomon, the king upon David’s death. Solomon and Adonijah remain mortal enemies until Solomon order him killed. That is why the sanctuary in Jerusalem is known as Solomon’s Temple and not Adonijah’s Temple.

So, what are we to make of this story? Surely it was included in the Hebrew Scriptures to make a point and not just to recall the sordid details of David’s failings. This King David is the epitome of historical heroes for the people of Israel. The gospels claim that Jesus was a descendant of David … a descendant of King David the scoundrel. Why include this story which can only be seen as something that dishonors David’s name?

This, like so many other stories in our Holy Scriptures, is about human flaws and foibles, and the redemptive power of God. Abraham was a liar. Rebekah was manipulative. Jacob defrauded his father Isaac and his brother Esau. Moses killed one of the Pharaoh’s guards. Ruth and Naomi tricked Boaz into sleeping with Ruth. Jonah ran away from God’s call and then complained about God's mercy to the pagan Ninevites. Peter proclaimed that he would never deny Jesus, but then did so three times. All the disciples did the same thing. Paul lamented that he was the least of all the apostles for his persecution of the church, and he lived with a “thorn in his side.”

First and foremost I believe this is a story about God’s redemption. And if King David can be redeemed by God than there is hope for you and for me. All the “what ifs” in the story make it intriguing. That it is also a story about sex and power and murder also makes it juicy. But in the end, it is really about David betraying a trust and failing to live up to what God wanted for him. Nathan acts as a mirror to David and he sees himself and his failings and he is ashamed. He cannot undo what he has already done, and he has to live with the consequences, but David is a different man … and he knows God’s redemption.

Redemption … just what is it? The Church has used the word for so long that it has taken on the special meaning of God’s action to wipe away our sins. But the secular meaning, like redeeming credit cards points for an airline ticket is closer to the mark. Redemption is like clearly a debt so that one regains their former life.

I think all of us have known times in our lives when we have wandered away from what we know to be our true self. There is an authentic self inside each of us … that image of God in which we are made. I’ve heard people described as being “comfortable in their own skin.” Those are genuine people with a deep sense of integrity. Yet there are times and circumstances that seem to send us of on a different path. We need “redemption.” That is, we need to trade in our credits and get back to our true being. That is the redemption I’m talking about today. A redemption that is a deep knowing that whatever we know as God loves us in spite of our wanderings … and that love is calling us back to a path to wholeness.

It is not whether this story really happened … or whether it is factual. The question is: How do we know this story to be true in the world around us, and in our own lives? Who of us has not fallen short of living into the fullness of the image of God in which we were made? Who of us has not seen our failings and changed our lives … and known God’s redemptive love?

The story happens over and over again. And when it happens to people of power and visibility we see it all over the news. Sometimes we just need to be thankful that our failings are not as juicy, and our lives are not as public. But God’s redemptive love is there nonetheless … to act as a mirror for our actions … to encourage us to turn around … to have the strength to accept the consequences … and then to re-enter our lives living into that image to which God has called us to.

The questions I raise about the story of David and Bathsheba are just a tiny glimpse of the many possibilities of what is written between the lines. Scholars and playwrights and song writers … like Leonard Cohen … all have embellished the tale in many directions … all the different ways that human beings like you and me might find the story acted out in our lives and the lives of those around us. But in the end this isn’t really a story about David and Bathsheba … it is a story about God. It isn’t just a story about sex and power … it is a story about failing to live into God’s image to which we are called. And it isn’t just about the tragedy of living in failure and all its consequences … it is a story about God’s loving redemption that calls us back to a new life … a new life that is changed by our prior foolishness into one of wisdom and faithfulness.

If God’s loving redemption is available to King David and his bride Bathsheba … then it certainly is available for you and me.

Hallelujah!

Amen.