

SERMON: Proper 12, Pentecost 8 2009

Geography and Power

Geography plays a significant role in determining how nations will behave. Look at the “Holy Land,” as one example. That land, for over 3000 years, has created a space for living, for dying, for loving, for hating, for forgetting and for remembering. The stories in our Bible emanate from this ancient land. It is our constant challenge to live the Bible anew in our own land and time.

King David, prominent in our Hebrew Bible lesson today, ruled during what is called the “first manifestation” of Israel, according to George Friedman. At its height, under King David, Israel extended from the Sinai Peninsula to the Euphrates, encompassing Damascus. It occupied, some, but relatively little, of the coastal region, an area beginning at what today is Haifa and running through to Jaffa, just north of today’s Tel Aviv. The coastal area to the north was held by Phoenicia, the area to the south, by the Philistines.

(It’s helpful to understand that Israel’s size and shape shifted over time. The general locale of Israel is fixed. Its precise borders have never been. Hence, conflict ensues to this day between modern Israel and Palestinian interests.)

Reading the books of the Bible which contain the zestful life of David, we discover that the idea of kingship grew among the tribes of Israel, and the methods and means of possessing and maintaining power in surrounding nations—particularly Egypt-- were adopted by Israel by the time of David. The spiritual dangers of establishing a monarchy had been duly noted by the last great Hebrew judge, Samuel, when Israel asked for a King.

David unwittingly started his ascent to power as a humble shepherd boy. He reached the pinnacle of power after Saul’s tragic deterioration and

demise. David defended his throne and his empire throughout his long lifetime, dying at the approximate age of 70, about 960 B.C.

2 Samuel: 11: 1-15

It was springtime, battle time. David, remaining at home in Jerusalem, rather than going out into the field with his men, sent Joab to lead his men against the men of Ammon. Ammon's chief royal city, Rabbath, lay in the midst of a fertile and well tilled valley. It flourished under a wealthy king at the time of David, and was well fortified; however, Rabbath finally succumbed to Joab's attack.

Land again. Battles over land, water and security. "Just like today," one might say.

While the second campaign against Ammon was raging, David was battling with his own lust, and it won over his better judgment. "Just like today," "one might also say.

The military history is, in itself, interesting, but its primary literary purpose is to provide a framework for the story of a flawed genius, whose charisma must have been unmatched in his day. Human interactions, "devises and desires," plotted over and against divine proclamations and laws, create the fabric of the tale.

Nathan was the Prophet-in-Residence, and he was always "on" to David. It was in Nathan's presence that David confessed his out-of-control spiral of betrayal beginning with Bathsheba and ending with the death of Uriah, the inconvenient husband. This scene is artfully portrayed in an ancient Byzantine Psalter—Book of Psalms. It depicts King David sitting in this throne confronted by Nathan. To the right of this action crouches a humbled King, on the floor, hands held out in dismay and grief. This psalter is dated 950 B.C.!

David's Court included the feature prevalent among other Mid Eastern Monarchs: the harem. With it, with all David's wives, accumulated throughout his wandering years, his years at Hebron and finally in Jerusalem, came the inevitable royal rivalry. Multiple siblings and half-siblings, all juggling for power and succession rights, will play out their own betrayals over time.

(Unger's *Bible Dictionary* gives a detailed family tree which goes beyond my level of comprehension, but it makes clear that the progeny created by David guaranteed the type of troubled waters that developed upon his death.)

Betrayal and Cover up

Throughout history, many attempts have been made to cover up incompetence, immorality, and crime. Our lesson from 2nd Samuel 11 is one of the great cover-up attempts of all time, and like so many, it too fails miserably.

The editors of this story intend to have us learn from David's actions...not to emulate them...but to avoid them. I think the Governor of South Carolina, Mark Sanford, got some of this confused when he recently compared himself to King David. He said his plight was just like that of King David. (He got that from his "C" Street buddies, "C" street being that "Family House," masquerading as a house of worship with tax exemption, which also provides subsidized housing for some powerful Senators and Members of Congress, where the sex and spirituality battlefield is alive and well.)

I think Sanford's analogy is quite a stretch on many levels; however, all of us can learn from the rich saga of David, and recognize that the Deuteronomic editors intended that readers soak up the reality of how sin begets misery and loss. The editors of this story were keen to show that

betrayal of God's ways leads not to happiness and peace, but to darkness and despair. These powerful writers and editors pull no punches: wrong headedness against Yahweh's decrees is a formula for disaster. You can see it over and over again in their material, which stresses the need to observe Mosaic Law and teachings. Maybe people, tempted to deceive, should read David's story *before*, not after, jumping into pools of deceit.

Back to Bathsheba

The other day, I was taken aback by a biblical commentary which read, "...David sent for her, and she appears voluntarily to have acceded to his sinful purpose." I had to read that again. There is absolutely nothing in the text to suggest that. Instead, I suggest that in the context of Middle Eastern court life, no woman would or could refuse the overtures of her King. There was no balance of power, even for a woman with a distinguished lineage such as that of Bathsheba. She was, after all, the wife of Uriah—one of the King's select "mighty men," and the daughter of Eliam. Bathsheba is not the central character in this morality play...David is. Bathsheba's prestige did mean, however, that she would not fade into the woodwork as just another woman made pregnant.

David vs. Uriah

David's character is contrasted to that of Uriah. Uriah is the "good guy" in the story. Uriah does not yield to the temptation of going home. He keeps the rule of abstinence during battle, and stays not only with his men, but close to his King. Of course, this infuriates David, who is trying to get Uriah home to Bathsheba to have relations with her. That is the only way to cover up his liaison with Uriah's wife while he was in battle. She was, after all, "with child." David's child.

The Deuteronomic editors must have had quite a time with this teaching opportunity. Uriah, the "good guy," faithful and true, over and against David who descends into the deepest waters of deceit when he manipulates his own army to have Uriah killed in battle. Clever, but morally repugnant.

The prophet Nathan confronted David when he realized what David had done: “Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house because you have despised me. “ The words of Nathan are harsh. They name the sins and the result of sin.

The resulting marriage to Bathsheba legitimizes the child, yes, but to what avail? The baby dies, as Nathan says he would, but could there really be any other result in a Deuteronomistic morality tale? I don't think so.

Redemption is possible, however, if true repentance and amendment of life is real. This takes discipline and commitment, as any sinner well knows who chooses this path. Superficial apologies and weak attempts of re-establishing a right relationship with God and with those offended, do not qualify as redemptive acts. The only “real deal” is deep contrition and persistent striving to amend ones' life. Then forgiveness, genuine forgiveness, is possible.

David does repent and has four more children with his wife, Bathsheba. All is not lost, although the “sword” never departs his house, as Nathan made clear. David lives with the consequences, but lives a long life. A new tale of intrigue begins with his children, and Bathsheba weighs in heavily on the side of her son, Solomon, over and against other contenders, but that story is for another time.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this sermon I stated that it is important to live anew with the Bible's teachings, in our own land and time. It is a challenge to each one of us, but a fascinating one. How, for example, does David's life inform our own? What do we see in David that we see in ourselves? How do we approach God and neighbor for forgiveness when we offend? These and other questions are provoked by the powerful saga of David's life, land and laments. Let the questions flow, take them to a quiet place with Our Lord,

and revel in the richness of the Word. Doing so will provide spiritual healing and moral direction for our lives, in the here and in the now.

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