

Before God

[2 Samuel 11:1-15; 11:26-12:15](#)

King David Sermon Series

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We've spent the last two weeks talking about how important a figure David was - his special relationship with God, his humble origins, his courage and faith - all of which helps us to understand why the Gospel writers are intent to point out that Jesus himself is an offshoot of David's family tree. Just as David was the long-awaited King of Israel, anointed by the prophets on behalf of God, so too is Jesus. All this language about Jesus coming from the line of David is in our Christmas carols, and also in the stories of Jesus' birth that we hear during Advent. The message? You can't know who Jesus is without knowing who David was.

But now we get to a part of David's story that makes you wonder not only what David was thinking, but what Jesus was thinking in associating himself with him.

We pared down the story that was read aloud, so let's just do a quick summary to make sure we're all on the same page about what happened. At this point, David is proving to be the King everybody wanted. After a series of military victories, he's ended the civil war between Israel and Judah and united them into one Kingdom. Big deal. He defeats the Philistines, the Moabites, and the Syrians. He's planning to build a Temple for God.

Obviously, now is the perfect time to put all of that enormous accomplishment into total jeopardy. Like so many politicians, David has an impulse control problem. David does exactly what we hoped he would never do: he abuses his power. But he doesn't abuse it over the *whole* people, at large; he abuses it among a *few* people, intimately.

David sees Bathsheba bathing from his rooftop. He learns that she is the wife of Uriah, which means, in this context, that she belongs to Uriah. David sleeps with her. We have no insight into Bathsheba's feelings on the matter.

David has relations with Bathsheba, something he clearly knows was wrong, because he then goes to elaborate lengths to cover it up. He tries to get Uriah to come home from battle and sleep with his wife, to create a justification should Bathsheba be pregnant by David. Uriah refuses, too pious and committed to leave his post, even after David gets him drunk. David finally sends Uriah to the front of battle, knowing he will be killed.

One sinful act gives birth to another, and another, until David has managed to justify murder to himself! Then the prophet Nathan comes on the scene and, with rhetorical flourish, uses a story to pull back the covering on David's manipulations. "You are the man!" Nathan declares to David, meaning, you, David, are the rich man who abused the poor man, who killed the poor man's baby lamb and betrayed his trust, who demonstrated no pity. You are the one who deserves to suffer for your sin, because when you sinned against the poor man, you sinned against God.

"Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" Nathan asks. He seems to be saying to David, remember when God saw right into you, saw the potential in your heart, the faith that no one else could? Well, God sees everything else too. Even the parts you tried to cover up.

Nothing can be hidden from God. Not the good parts of us. Not the bad parts.

For the past several years, my high school, a high-profile East Coast boarding school, has been embroiled in an abuse scandal. There are allegations of sexual misconduct by faculty and staff against students, as well as improper handling of abuses between students, dating back to the 50s, when the school was all boys, through its transition to coeducation in the 70s, through the years I spent there in the late 90s, through the 2010s.

It will take years for the legal ramifications to play out in criminal and civil courts. And the emotional impact on the community is even harder to understand or measure. Beloved figures have been exposed as abusers, or as protectors of abusers. A culture of secret-keeping and behind-the-scenes maneuverings has been revealed. It is clear that for generations, people in power have been more concerned with safeguarding the institution than the young people in their care.

As an graduate of the school, I routinely get email updates about how the school is responding to the scandal: the independent investigations, the firings, the new student safety policies, official school responses to news exposés, that sort of thing. I'm also in several alumni groups online, and I take it all in. Many alums are sharing their own stories of abuse or mistreatment at the hands of adults they trusted. And many continue to criticize the school, saying that its actions haven't been transparent enough, or that it is scapegoating certain key figures in the scandal at the expense of real systemic change.

As I've watched this process, I'm of course reminded of so many similar processes unfolding on other stages in our society. I'm reminded of how variations of the story of David and Bathsheba plays out, over and over again, with different names and settings and outcomes, across time. It's an old familiar tale. A thread that connects all these stories is this:

Accountability is really hard work. Holding powerful people responsible for their actions is strangely complicated, even when it should be simple. It's messy. It's unsatisfying. It's disappointing. As a society, I think, we're still quite unpracticed at telling the truth about the harm we can do to one another, and then figuring out what to do next. How to serve justice. How and when and if to forgive. How to change our systems so that people can't hurt people in the same ways again.

In the context of our Bible story today, accountability looks like this: the depth of David's errors are brought to his attention. He can't hide from the truth of his sin. Nathan shoves it in his face, followed by threats of all the terrible ways God will punish him, publicly. This is key: "For you, [David,] did it secretly," God says, "but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun."

Just as nothing is hidden from God, God won't let David's atonement be hidden from the people. They, like, God, will know who David really is.

At this, David repents. He recognizes his error. "I have sinned against the Lord," he says, disappointing those of us who wish he might apologize to Uriah or—*now this would be wild*—Bathsheba. God punishes David, terribly. His child with Bathsheba dies. This seems unfair to all involved, especially Bathsheba, especially the child, who didn't ask to be brought

into any of this. Again, David's original sin radiates out from him like a wave, pulling more and more people in its undertow.

*But into this mess, God brings forgiveness.* God forgives David and takes his sin away, so that he will not die. And so David continues to be king, a good king, a king who suffers and loves and makes some more mistakes, mainly with his family, but ultimately delivers a united Israel into the hands of his wise son Solomon, whom he fathers with Bathsheba.

And, in our tradition, David is ancestor to Jesus, prince of peace.

What does it mean that Jesus claims David as his ancestor? Does Jesus do this in spite of David's flawed humanness? Or because of it?

I'm firmly in the second camp. Maybe, in connecting himself so thoroughly to the David narrative, Jesus wasn't just saying something about himself. Maybe he was saying something about God, and what God wants from us.

As Nathan reminds us, God sees everything. But rather than being terrified by that, maybe we are meant to be comforted, for perhaps in God's sight we have the permission we need to be as flawed, as complicated, as contradictory, as impossible—in short, as fully human—as we really are.

Perhaps it's a sign to us that no one on earth—not even kings anointed by the prophets—no one on earth can escape the human condition. Not only that: we are not supposed to escape our humanness, but rather be consecrated for living it, for giving ourselves over to its joys and sorrows, trusting that throughout it all, there is a faithful God who claims us as God's own.

And we do this with the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even our least admirable qualities, not even our sins, not even our regrets, not even the harm we've done to others. If we truly trust in that, then I think we can be more honest, not just with God and with ourselves but with other people too. We can admit to our wrongdoings. We

can hear the truth of what other people have to tell us, even if it hurts, even if it's something we'd rather not hear, even if it calls us to account.

I'm hoping and praying and working for a world where all Bathshebas have a voice, and we know their stories; where Nathans listen and advocate; where Davids admit wrongdoing and repent. I think justice would look and feel very different in that world, though I'm not sure exactly how. That world still feels very far away.

But Advent is almost upon us. That time when we prepare for Jesus, whom the Gospels call the *son* of David. Advent is a holy time, when we are reminded that God's kingdom is not so far away as we think. The holy is everywhere, just below and above the surface, just waiting to break through, to be made flesh.

Christ can be birthed into any of us, flaws and all, because God knows all of us and loves each of us.

Amen.