

For Saints and Sinners

2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:14

November 7, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I will let you in on a little secret. My middle name is Greer. It's a secret because I just don't like my middle name, so I never use it. I even try to keep it out of official documents, if I can. When my parents were in college, they had a friend who was in love with a woman whose last name was Greer, and he pronounced it with such love in his voice, they said, that they thought it would make a great middle name for me. Ah, the things we do to our children when we name them! But it doesn't really matter so much what our middle names are because we only hear them spoken aloud a few times in our lives. We hear it when we walk across the stage at graduation, and God bless the poor dean who has to pronounce all those names! Sometimes our full names are used when we marry. But most often, I think, we heard our middle names when we were children and we had misbehaved. "Cathryn Greer Turrentine, you get in this house right now!" That happened to you, right? When you heard all three names, you knew you were in trouble. You were in for a scolding for sure.

My sweetheart Dave, on the other hand, is one of those people who is called by his middle name. Officially he is Donn David Ostroth. He tells me he didn't often misbehave as a child ... (*ahem!*) ... but sometimes he was rambunctious, as boys are, or snarky. On those occasions, his mother didn't shout "Donn David Ostroth!" Instead, she would say, "Oh, Davud." As in, "Oh Da-vud, I am so disappointed in what you just did." I like that, really. It's a loving tone for a scolding. You know you have done something wrong, maybe something really bad, but you are still loved in spite of it.

I think of this whenever I read today's scripture, the story of David and Bathsheba. We first met David a few weeks ago as a young boy, the youngest in his family, who was out tending the sheep when the prophet Samuel came to Bethlehem to anoint him as the future king of Israel, chosen because God could see past his appearance to what was in his heart. Then we saw him marching into solo combat with the Philistine giant Goliath, still just a boy, but claiming the power of the Living God as he reached into his pouch for the smooth stone that would bring him victory. Last week we saw David at the height of his powers, grown up now, king of all Israel. Today, we see David at his most human, corrupted by the power of his office. Listen now for the word of God from Second Samuel, chapters 11 and 12.

When that time of year came around again, the anniversary of the Ammonite aggression, King David dispatched his general Joab and his fighting men of Israel in full force to destroy the Ammonites for good. They laid siege to Rabbah, but David stayed in Jerusalem. One late afternoon, David got up from taking his nap and was strolling on the roof of the palace. From his vantage point on the roof, he saw a woman bathing. The woman was stunningly beautiful. David sent to ask about her, and was told, "Isn't this Bathsheba, ... the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent his agents to get her. After she arrived, he went to bed with her.... Then she returned home. Before long she realized she was pregnant. So, she sent word to David: Simply, "I'm pregnant."

David then got in touch with Joab: "Send Uriah the Hittite to me." When he arrived, David asked him for news from the front—how things were going with Joab and the troops and with the fighting. Then he said to Uriah, "Go home. Have a refreshing bath and a good night's rest" [meaning, "Go sleep you're your wife so everyone will think the baby is yours"].

After Uriah left the palace, an informant of the king was sent after him. But Uriah didn't go home. He slept that night at the palace entrance, along with the king's servants. David asked Uriah, "Didn't you just come off a hard trip? So why didn't you go home?" Uriah replied to David, "The Ark of the Covenant is out there with the fighting men of Israel and Judah—in tents. My master Joab and his servants are roughing it out in the fields. So, how can I go home and eat and drink and enjoy my wife? On your life, I'll not do it!"

"All right," said David, "have it your way. Stay for the day and I'll send you back tomorrow." The next day David invited Uriah to eat and drink with him, and David got him drunk. But in the evening Uriah again went out and slept with his master's servants. He didn't go home. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front lines where the fighting is the fiercest. Then pull back and leave him exposed so that he's sure to be killed."

So Joab, holding the city of Rabbah under siege, put Uriah in a place where he knew there were fierce enemy fighters. When the city's defenders came out to fight Joab, some of David's soldiers were killed, including Uriah the Hittite. Joab sent David a full report on the battle. He instructed the messenger, "After you have given to the king a detailed report on the battle, if he flares in anger, say, 'And by the way, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.'"

Joab's messenger arrived in Jerusalem and gave the king a full report. He said, "The enemy was too much for us. They advanced on us in the open field, and we pushed them back to the city gate. But then arrows came hot and heavy on us from the city wall, and eighteen of the king's soldiers died." When the messenger completed his report of the battle, David got angry at Joab. He vented it on the messenger: "Why did you get so close to the city? Didn't you know you'd be attacked from the wall? Why did you get close to the wall!"

"By the way," said Joab's messenger, "your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead." Then David told the messenger, "Oh. I see. Tell Joab, 'Don't trouble yourself over this. War kills—sometimes one, sometimes another—you never know who's next. Redouble your assault on the city and destroy it.' Encourage Joab."

When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she grieved for her husband. When the time of mourning was over, David sent someone to bring her to his house. She became his wife and bore him a son.

But GOD was not at all pleased with what David had done, and sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan said to him, "There were two men in the same city—one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep, herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little female lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him.

"One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal to set before his guest." David exploded in anger. "As surely as GOD lives," he said to Nathan, "the man who did this ought to be lynched! And he must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess!"

"You are the man!" said Nathan. "And here is what GOD, the God of Israel, has to say to you: 'I made you king over Israel. I freed you from the fist of Saul. I gave you your master's daughter and other wives to have and to hold. I gave you both Israel and Judah. And if that hadn't been enough, I'd have gladly thrown in much more. So why have you treated the word of GOD with brazen contempt, doing this great evil? You murdered Uriah the Hittite, then took his wife as your wife. Worse, you killed him with an Ammonite sword! And now, because you treated God with such contempt and took Uriah the Hittite's wife as your wife, killing and murder will continually plague your family.... I'll make trouble for you out of your own family.... You did your deed in secret; I'm doing mine with the whole country watching!"

Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against GOD."

Nathan said, "God forgives you, but there will be consequences for your actions. Your descendants will suffer because of what you have done." May God add a blessing to the reading and hearing of this scripture.

Oh Da-vud, I am so disappointed in you! God chose you because God could see what was in your heart. You showed all of us what was in your heart when you marched out unarmed to defend your nation against Goliath and the Philistines, calling only on the power of the Living God to supply the victory. You became such a great king.

Yet, here you are, with the blessing of God and all the power and riches you could ever want, and this is what you do? Adultery – perhaps rape – and a cowardly murder to cover your tracks? THIS is what is in your heart now? Oh Da-vud! You have fallen so far! You know you have done something really bad, David, yet here we learn – as you learn – that God can love you in spite of it, and forgive even this.

Uriah the Hittite is the one to admire in this story, actually. He is not even a child of the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures, yet he acts with perfect integrity here. He refuses to take comfort at home when the Ark of the Covenant and his fellow soldiers are in danger on the battlefield. Uriah's heart is pure.

But King David, who might be leading his army in battle, as he used to do, has chosen instead to stay in Jerusalem and take a nap. Then take his neighbor's wife. Then get his neighbor killed. And he can't even see the evil he is doing.

He is drunk with the power of his office, this throne that God has given him. He has lost his center, and all through the story it is the people around him who pay the price. Oh Da-vud!

God works in mysterious ways, God's wonders to perform. Usually that means that God is working through imperfect, broken people, people capable of great acts of love and sacrifice and also capable of great sin.

To build the nation of Israel, God called David. David united the Northern and Southern tribes and delivered a period of peace and prosperity unlike any they had seen before. But David also broke God's commandments and hurt the people around him. We had such great hopes for him. He turned out to be just one of us.

Later in this service we will remember those we have loved and lost, the perfect and imperfect saints of our lives, those who have shaped us. We remember always the good things about them, their perfections. We recall with clarity their greatest accomplishments, the dearest things they ever did. In our quiet moments we may remember their weaknesses as well, the ways they sometimes hurt us. Yet we love them and we carry them in our hearts always.

God loves us in this same way. God sees the greatness we are capable of, the love we have to give, and calls us to live that in that love always. But when we fall short, when we fail, even when we fail spectacularly, as David did, God can forgive us and love us in spite of it. And this is good news for all of us. Thanks be to God!

Amen