

SERMON: 2018/08/05 (11th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-13 & John 6:24-35

[Invite children to the front.]

What is your favourite kind of candy?

Is it... "smarties"?!

Or... "Skittles"?!

Or what about... "Twizzlers"?!

Go on, tell me:

what is your favourite kind of candy?

[Wait for answers.]

Well, one of mine is the "everlasting gobstopper."

Like this here. [Take one out of its box.]

It's very hard, and you can't chew it. [Put it in mouth.]

Sooo, you just "pop" it in your mouth and suck!

And, if you've some self-restraint - *which I don't!* - the flavour can last for hours and hours *and hours*.

(It just keeps going.)

But do you know something?

It doesn't fill my stomach *at all*.

I'm always hungry afterwards.

I *always* need something else to eat.

And the same is true when I eat normal food too: for a little while I'm satisfied - I'm happy.

But just a few hours later, I need to eat again!

It can be very frustrating.

Well, last week, we heard about how Jesus performed a miracle of multiplication and fed a *huuuge(!)* crowd with just two dried fishes and some bread-rolls.

But all those people became hungry again too, and so they went on a search to find Him.

First, they went to Capernaum, which is where Jesus had lived with Peter [Mt. 4:13], but they weren't there.

Then, they launched some small boats and went across the lake to see if He was

back in the region of the Gadarenes: *and He was!*

But - oh oh! - He wouldn't give them any more free meals.

"No," He said, what you really need is something much, *much* better; and only *I* can give it to you.

And it won't fill the hole in your bellies - in your stomachs, but it will give you something much more important - 'eternal life'.

'[W]hoever believes in [Jesus]' - whoever allows Him to 'dwell in your hearts through faith' [Eph. 3:17] - 'will never be hungry [in the paradise of the Messiah's kingdom, which is to come]' [Jn. 6:35].

And isn't that the best miracle of all?

Let's pray: Father God, help us to love Jesus as "the bread of life" more than worldly, physical things, by your Holy Spirit, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

The last time we were together, we heard how, in our Old Testament reading, that King David, strolling around his palace one evening, saw from afar a 'beautiful' woman bathing at another man's house. [2 Sam. 11:1-2]

Smitten, he had her fetched up to his bedroom, and, to use the delicate euphemism of the NRSV translation, 'lay with her' [v.4], causing her to become pregnant with a son. [see: v.27]

Not only were they both married (to other people) at the time, but, as if you weren't scandalised enough already, her husband, Uriah, was away at the battlefield with the Ammonites, endangering himself fighting in *David's* war.

But let's not stop there, because this shameful "soap opera" doesn't either(!): the king then tries to cover up his misdemeanour by having brave, dutiful, conscientious Uriah brought back to Jerusalem in the hope that nature would "take its course," and the other man would be deceived into believing that *he* was the one who had fathered his wife's (new) child.

But things go awry - the best laid plans and all that... - and even having been made drunk, Uriah still declines to enjoy the comforts of home whilst he has friends sleeping rough in a foreign field.

Finally, *exasperated*, David sends Uriah back to be placed 'in the forefront of [combat]' where, in a grotesque affront to the values of martial chivalry and the warrior's code, gives orders for the poor, valiant soldier to be abandoned by his comrades at a moment when they were being "hard" pressed, and, isolated, to be butchered by the enemy. [v.15-17]

And I mean that: I mean "*butchered*."

Modern warfare - at least as most of us are familiar with it, which is to say as it is depicted in movies - seems a pretty clinical, tidy affair:

bullets are fired from hundreds of yards away at a barely visible opposition, in whom they make crimson little puncture-holes.

But this was the dawn of the Iron Age; of infantry - it was mostly infantry in the Levant - hacking at each other face-to-face with hand-weapons.

So make no mistake, Uriah's end was *not* a glorious one.

In my own mind, I picture the moment when the Duke of York, having been flung from his horse and weighed down by his expensive plate-armor in deep, churned up mud, is disembowelled from all sides by the French at Agincourt in Kenneth Brannagh's stirring interpretation of Shakespeare's, *Henry (the) V.*[1989 - n.1]

The scene is a *grisly* one.

And so it surely was for Uriah too at the siege of Rabbah on that lonely day.[v.1 & 16]

Cuckolded *and* assassinated by the very one who was supposed to be looking out for him.

There's no doubt, therefore, that, as David admits in the final verse of the passage today, "[he has] *sinned* against the Lord." [12:13]

Oh yes.

But remember, David was chosen - '*anointed*' [1 Sam. 16:13] - by Heaven to replace Saul because he was supposed to be 'a man after [God's] own heart'. [1 Sam. 13:14]

The question you might ask yourself, then, is: "*What's happened?!*"

"Did they make some terrible mistake?"

Because there can be no doubt that David has done something diabolical.

Something beyond excuse or palatable explanation.

He's become a monster.

Indeed, you might even say that's there's some resonance here between this episode and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; of creators bringing into the world murderous abominations.

And this is all especially pertinent given the comparisons that some have made in recent months between David's conduct and that of our own libidinous commander-in-chief; *misguided* comparisons that are, I guess, supposed to exonerate in some way - and to some small degree - the president's (unbecoming) behavior.[n.2]

And there have been too commentators that have sought to blame *Bathsheba* for this [wave Bible readings insert] horrendous episode:

that '[s]he invited David's gaze and his sexual attention. John Calvin[, for example,] wrote, 'She should have exercised discretion, so as not to be seen.

...'[And] Abraham Kuyper[, prime minister of the Netherlands in the early 1900s

and an 'influential...theologian',[n.3] also insisted that Bathsheba seduced David. [That s]he demonstrated a 'reckless, almost salacious carelessness. ...[and chose deliberately to wash herself where] she knew she could be seen [from the royal residence]... [Furthermore, t]hese commentators insisted that Bathsheba should have refused both the invitation [from David to join him in his chambers] and the sexual contact [that he initiated]. Kuyper said that Bathsheba should have 'wrestled to the death' before she yielded to adultery. ...[and that because, evidently, she didn't, then she] must have led him on.

Some interpreters [even conjecture]...that poor [little] David [may have been] having a midlife crisis' - pointing in the way of evidence to his self-imposed absence from the conflict in the north east - "Rabbah," by the way, is modern-day Amman, in the Kingdom of Jordan [<https://goo.gl/maps/DBC8iijQZdJ2>] - '[and so] needed to reassert his flagging masculinity by [conquering] the beautiful [wife of another]. [And p]erhaps a needy middle-aged man [strikes a] more sympathetic [chord with you]'...[n.4]

'[But a]lthough Bathsheba has been characterized as being a seductress, such a characterisation hardly does justice to the subtlety of the text. ... The text itself does not focalize Bathsheba in a sexualized manner, but leaves such focalization to our imaginations' - *or not*, as the case may be. 'In fact, [our author] says nothing about [her] state of dress or undress. It is another gap, which we tend to fill in' with assumptions that may say more about us than about the original men and women of that era.[n.5]

On the other hand, *objectively*, there 'is no evidence [either] that she is ever less than a willing participant in [what took place]'[n.6] - we never *hear* from her protests or refusals; but whilst this *may* be true 'there remains', let's face it, 'the [*immense*] power differential between David and Bathsheba, and *many* scholars 'see [her as a innocent victim]...as someone caught up in an intrigue not of her own making' and against which she was *painfully* defenceless.[n.7] 'In short,' one might reasonably conclude, 'he...raped [her]'.[n.8]

But why are we bothering to "comb" through these dirty, unhappy details?
Of what significance are they to us *today*?
After all, we're hopefully not guilty of such heinous crimes. [Pause.]

Well, if nothing else, notice this: notice that God *noticed*.
God, then, isn't some far distant (alien) intelligence indifferent to what we do to one another; uninterested in us and in our fate.
And this simple observation, for many, is what they *desperately* need to hear: so many people feel uncared for; unloved.
And as far as that might be true by other people, this is *never* true about the One who made us.

He didn't just wind up the pocket-watch of the universe and then step back to do other things.

Thus, in *Matthew*, we find Jesus saying: "Aren't two sparrows sold for only a penny? [Yet] your Father knows when any one of them falls to the ground. Even the hairs on your head are counted. So don't be afraid! You are worth much more than many sparrows." [10:29-31]

But because this is true - because we are *cherished* by God, all of us - every cell, every pore, every eye-lash - He cannot overlook our sinfulness towards one another - the ways we hurt each other by lies or gossip or greed or *whatever*, and *must* bring, therefore, as the Psalmist - *David* - says, 'judgment' [Ps. 51:5], which is to say, *rectitude*.

Justice.

Isn't that what jilted, dishonoured Uriah deserves?

And Bathsheba too?

That David should be, as Nathan warns, "troubled" by the Lord. [2 Sam. 12:11]

Who else can deliver on this *after* the perpetrator's death - or in the face of an untouchable, wealthy, well-connected man, whether the ruler of a nation or of a Hollywood Studio?

And yet we must be clear that '*all* have fallen short of the glory of God' [Rom. 3:23]; that the Divine is unconcerned for the distinctions we tend to make between our sins and those of others: consider again *Matthew*, this time chapter 5: Jesus teaches that, "You have heard it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' - like David - '...But I say to you that [even] if you say, "You fool," you will [also] be liable to...hell...fire.' [v.21-22]

This *seems* like a "hard teaching." [Jn. 6:60]

But it makes sense when you begin to really appreciate, as Saint Paul reminded us in *Ephesians* last week, 'what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [of] the love of Christ' [3:18-19].

And this is why we should be *hungry* for "the bread of Life" of the Eucharist [Jn. 6:34], conveying to us as it does the opportunity we have to now - thanks to the Crucifixion it symbolises - to possess "clean hearts" and a "renewed" - *corrected* - relationship with our Father above. [see Ps. 51:11]

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBH4hyiF1Lo> - from approx. 5:14. (NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN!)

2. See, for example: Rodriguez, Sarah (8th of March 2016), 'Falwell Speaks', *Liberty Champion*, available at <https://www.liberty.edu/champion/2016/03/falwell-speaks/> (accessed August 4, 2018).
3. 'Abraham Kuyper', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Kuyper
4. Japinga, Lynn ()2017, *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who They Were and Why They Matter*, Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 128.
5. Koenig, Sara M. (2011), *Isn't This Bathsheba? A Study in Characterization (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 177)*, Eugene, O. R.: Pickwick Publications (Wipf & Stock Publishers), 40.
6. Nicol, George G. (March 1997), 'The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative', *The Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Volume 22, No. 73, pp. 43-54, 50.
7. Zucker, David J. (2013), *The Bible's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 51.
8. *Ibid.*