

Sermon: 2 Samuel 11:1-15 (Proper 12B)
Christ Church Riverdale, 26 July 2009
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2 Samuel 11:1-15 ^{NRS} In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. ² It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³ David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴ So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵ The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." ⁶ So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷ When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸ Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹ But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰ When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" ¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." ¹² Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³ David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. ¹⁴ In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵ In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

"Lead us not into temptation." The story of David and Bathsheba marks a turning point in David's kingship, even though the story starts small. "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . ." David stays home. David stays in Jerusalem and helps prove the adage, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." When he gets up from a nap one afternoon and is on his roof looking around, he sees a woman bathing—a woman he finds beautiful. When he finds out who she is—Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite—that doesn't stop him from doing what he wants. David sends "messengers" to take her—not just to summon her but to seize her--so that David can have her for the night. Now some commentators and artists over the years have tried to give Bathsheba an active role in the story. Sometimes she is made out to be flirtatious or seductive—bathing intentionally where David would see her--but the biblical text gives no evidence to suggest that Bathsheba did anything to contribute to her situation. The Hebrew Scriptures do not sanitize the story of the greatest king of Israel, but set it out both good and bad, and from this point in David's life, things get bad more and more.

After Bathsheba sends word she is pregnant, David becomes obsessed with a cover-up: He brings Uriah back from the battlefield, ostensibly to report on the military situation, but really as a pretext for Uriah to make a conjugal visit and then not count the months too carefully when the child is born. Not only would this cover up David's sin, but it would get him out of his responsibility for the child. But Uriah puts the king to shame with his discipline and commitment to David's battle. Uriah the Hittite, a foreigner, is so devoted to his comrades in arms and the Ark of God that he can't bring himself to visit his wife while they are still in

danger. David tries everything—telling Uriah to go to his wife, getting him drunk—but nothing will sway this steadfast warrior. And so David, increasingly desperate, decides to get rid of Uriah, and sinks to having Uriah carry what is in essence his own death warrant, ordering the commander to put Uriah in the kind of danger that will ensure that he will die. Although the passage we heard this morning ends there, I will say that David’s shameful strategy succeeds.

“Lead us not into temptation.” These words evoke an image not of committing an isolated sin here and there, but of walking step by step into a territory. That’s an accurate picture, I think. David didn’t set out to take a married soldier’s wife, get her pregnant, and be so desperate to cover it up that he has the man killed. No, but it all started in the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle . . . and David stays home. If David were where he should’ve been, doing his job, being faithful to his anointing by God as king, then no idle walking around on his rooftop and checking out somebody else’s wife whose husband is off at war, and so no pregnancy, no cover-up, no murder. But as we have seen over and over in our own time, where there is political power, temptation is never far away. That very power can give people a sense of entitlement to whatever they want; it can give them a sense of immunity from the consequences of their actions; and it can give them sense of control that make them attempt a cover-up often worse than the actions themselves.

Not enough facts of the case have come out yet to let us know the path of temptation in New Jersey that led to a breathtaking combination of alleged bribery, money laundering, and the sale of human organs by a group of politicians and clergy. My hunch is that nobody set out with the whole thing in mind, but that it started small, like David staying home in the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle. “Lead us not into temptation.” It would be easy to say that giving into temptation is about somebody else—that it’s about the powerful who engage in high-profile sin, whether that’s in New Jersey or thousands of years ago in Jerusalem. Yes, the more power someone has, the more widespread the destruction they can cause with their sin, but that doesn’t let us off the hook. Jesus taught his disciples (no group of big shots) to pray daily, “Lead us not into temptation,” which can also be translated, “Save us from the time of trial” or “Do not put us to the test.”

In our Baptismal Covenant, we promise to persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. Persevere in resisting evil—keep at it, because sin is going to keep after us. *Whenever* we fall into sin—not if by some fluke once or twice we fall into sin, but whenever—it’s going to happen—repent and return to God. And to me, “whenever” also means *as soon as* we fall into sin. As soon as we take that first step—the step that may seem harmless like staying home when a king should be leading in battle, the step we can get away with because we know nobody else is noticing. Before our small sins lead us into the temptation to commit bigger and more destructive sins, repent—turn around and go a different direction, change your mind. In other words, try not to even go there!

Is it that simple? Most of the time. Is it easy? Of course not! Do I always manage to do it? No. But I can say this: resisting evil, choosing to be led in a direction other than temptation is a habit, a way of life that can be developed by listening closely not just to the “Thou shalt

nots” but especially to the “Thou *shalts*.” God calls us to righteousness not so that our lives can be empty, but so that they can be full—full of the right things and open to receive the grace and blessing that God keeps on offering us as beautiful gifts. Is it easy? Of course not. Is it worth it to persevere and trust God? Absolutely!