“Truth and Restoration”

There’s something about a SMART phone that changes the way I see myself and the way I see others. This small glowing rectangle I keep close gives me extraordinary powers. Any problem, any need, any want–there’s an app for that. This device that I touch hundreds, maybe thousands of times per day tells me I’m in charge of my own life. I can scroll and send messages without the people around me knowing exactly what I’m up to. My avatars and usernames can keep me anonymous as I comment, click, swipe and like. I become like royalty, doing whatever I choose. Holding this bundle of circuits and precious metals, I feel invincible.

Technology has brought new ways to think we are in charge of our lives. These products try to sell us “self-reliance”.[1]

This illusion of control is actually nothing new. King David, through the handheld device of a sceptre, had extraordinary powers. This power combined with the temptations common to us all led to the troubling account we are about to read.

I want to acknowledge that this reading from 2 Samuel may be especially disturbing because it deals with sexual abuse. I encourage you to reach out for support, if you need it.

Read 2 Sam 11:1-5, 14, 26-12:13a

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

2 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, **3** and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” **4** Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. **5** The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.”

Skipping down to verse 14…

14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah.

And now to verse 26…

26 When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. **27** After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she

[1] This phrase is used in the 2023 film *BlackBerry* as part of a sales pitch for the first smartphone.

became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. **2** The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, **3** but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

4 “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

5 David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! **6** He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

7 Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. **8** I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. **9** Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. **10** Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’

11 “This is what the LORD says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. **12** You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’”

13 Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

<u>This is the word of the Lord/Thanks be to God</u>

This story is troubling from many different angles. We see something corrupt, something rotten, and we might ask ourselves how such a thing could happen. Don’t we ask that question, at least in our minds, whenever a case of abuse becomes public. Part of us is disgusted, and part of us also wants to find out how such a thing could go on sometimes for months or years without anyone else knowing, without anyone speaking out.

In this story of abuse, we see a progression of corruption: how it starts, how it disrespects, how it “takes”, and how it spreads.

When we meet David in this story, we've just been told that it is springtime, when kings go to war. Except, David is not on the battlefield. He's at his palace. Meanwhile, Joab the commander and the rest of the army have left the city. David, from his lofty perch, sees a woman bathing and does not turn away. Jesus, the true king and descendent of David, later declares this truth: "whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart." So, David's acts of corruption begin with a lustful look.

Next, we notice disrespect. David wants to know the woman's identity. Yet when he finds out who she is related to, it doesn't seem to make any difference to his plans for her. Women at this time were defined by whose daughter or whose wife they were. It should have been like a loud blast of a ram's horn for David to hear that this woman was DOUBLY related to two of his 30 most elite soldiers. Eliam is her father. Uriah the Hittite is her husband. Not stated here, but what we can discover from later stories and lists, is that this woman is the granddaughter of David's most trusted advisor, Ahithophel. Really! Disrespect is multiplied as David proceeds in a corrupt path, and it does not end until an inconvenient soldier has been put to death.

David sends messengers to "get" Bathsheba despite all he knows about her as a married woman. We don't know what kind of messengers they were, but they bore the authority of the king. She could not refuse them. And there was nobody to stand up for her. The Hebrew word translated here as "get" is more often translated as "take" and sometimes "capture" or "seize" in other Bible passages. Corruption occurs whenever we "take" what does not belong to us–honour, possessions, a person's agency–to meet our own selfish desires.

Finally, we observe in this story how corruption spreads. Messengers and palace staff are asked to compromise their morals to get the king what he wants. Joab, the commander, is forced to use a foolish battle strategy. It results in a targeted death and other casualties. King David marshalls all his resources to cover up his adultery–tainting those who cooperate with him or even witness what is happening and keep quiet.

And David's plot seems to be working out. He adds a widow to his growing collection of wives. The pregnancy will appear legitimate to at least some of his subjects. The birth rate at the palace is getting a bit hard to keep track of these days.

"But the thing which David did displeased the Lord." This statement prepares us for Nathan's dramatic visit with the king.

The Lord sends Nathan and equips him to share the truth with David, a truth David is hiding and ignoring. This is the first glimmer of grace in this narrative. The truth about who God is and who we are is used to graciously restore the relationship broken by corruption.

Nathan uses a story to break through David's defences. As humans we can't help ourselves when someone starts to tell a story, even when it starts with simple words like, "There were two men in a certain town." David keeps listening as the rich man in the story brutally takes the single female lamb from the poor man to feed his dinner guest. David is outraged. With the authority of a judge, he pronounces guilt and a death sentence for this man who "had no pity."

The next words from Nathan are chilling. The tables are turned. "YOU ARE THE MAN".

If David had any doubt about the authority of the prophet who came to the palace that day, Nathan makes it abundantly clear who he represents. “This is what the Lord says…” In contrast to David’s actions that “take”, the Lord begins by testifying to his own generosity towards David. Notice the verbs:

I anointed you
I delivered you
I gave
I gave
I would have given you even more

Is it possible that David has forgotten his humble beginnings? Wasn’t there a time when David was reluctant to accept the wife offered to him because he felt it too big an honour to become King Saul’s son-in-law. Wasn’t there a time when David was conscience stricken at having cut off a piece of King Saul’s robe? Had David fallen into the trap of building an empire like the nations around him? He took the best of what he saw and added her to his harem, no matter who was in the way!

There’s a temptation when we read the stories of 1 & 2 Samuel to scout out the “good guys” and the “bad guys”. We can then end up with a simplistic takeaway of “Don’t do what the bad guy did. Be a good guy. Be like Nathan and speak truth to power.”

But the story of Scripture is not about dividing people into two groups, good and evil.

A survivor of a Russian concentration camp, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wisely said, “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”[2] Yes, we are all capable of evil, even a man after God’s own heart. These stories call for self-reflection.

The specifics of our offences against God and fellow human beings may be uniquely our own, but they stem from elevating ourselves and playing God in the lives of others. We look out for number 1, no matter who gets in the way. We take for granted those close to us and speak harshly to them. We use our razor wit to humiliate others online. We set our hearts on investments and our hope in insurance policies. We tell ourselves that giving into our greed, our lust or our pride is normal. We look down on others, convinced that God is on our side. We treat people made in God’s image as pawns in our chess game.

Still, as we eavesdrop on this one-way conversation, we might inwardly be cheering God on. “Yeah, you tell him!” “Let him have it!”

Or we might berate David: “Yeah, David, what were you thinking?”

David’s response to Nathan’s words may disarm us because he confesses, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

He does not offer the kinds of excuses we’ve heard before. “Mistakes were made.” “This is not who I am.” “It was consensual.”

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[2] In his book *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), p. 168.

David says, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Of course, many humans have been sinned against in this terrible episode, but David admits the truth: the ways he took the law into his own hands were an affront to his Maker and Sovereign Lord.

David has been put in his right place. The Lord is God, and David is not.

Nathan assures David of forgiveness and David will not die as a result of this corruption. This is good news for David and good news for all mortals. There is a way to be restored in his relationship with God.

The Heidelberg Catechism addresses this topic in Q and A 56. I will read the question and ask you to read the answer in unison.
Q:“What do you believe by ‘the forgiveness of sins’?”

A: “I believe that God,
because of Christ’s satisfaction,
will no longer remember
any of my sins
or my sinful nature
which I need to struggle against all my life.

Rather, by grace
God grants me the righteousness of Christ
to free me forever from judgment.”

Lest we think David is getting off easy, read the next chapters when you get home. Forgiveness does not erase the consequences of our corrupt actions. Forgiveness does not take away the hurt experienced by victims and survivors.

In fact, Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman says this abuse and coverup are a “pivotal turning point of 2nd Samuel.” He adds, “Innocence is never to be retrieved.”[3] David has lost his authority as the moral leader of his nation and of his own family. Years earlier David took on a giant so “the whole world may know there is a God in Israel” (I Samuel 17:46). Now the watching world seems to say, “If that’s how the godly behave, I want no part of it.”

In my lifetime the church I grew up in twice had to depose its pastor due to sexual misconduct. The first of these pastors baptized me. A great deal of pain was experienced by those directly affected, and it also rippled through the congregation and the community. It has taken more than a decade since the most recent incident for healing and trust in leaders to be restored. This congregation has experienced what Trillia Newbell notes about today’s text, “Although our shepherds may fail us, the Good Shepherd never will.”[4]

We have seen a similar swath of damage when celebrity pastors and church officials abuse power, deceive and disappoint. About this phenomena, Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight, have the following to say: “Because celebrities see themselves as superior, and they

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[3] Walter Brueggemann, (1990), *First and Second Samuel,* p. 271.
[4] Trillia J. Newbell (2022) *52 Weeks in the Word,* p. 113

surround themselves by people who treat them as superior, they may easily start to assume they are exempt from ordinary rules and standards. They are confident someone will cover their tracks, explain away their sin, and pave the way for future success."[5]

Our true King, Jesus, the descendent of David through Bathsheba's second son, came to show us another way. The extraordinary power he had as the Son of God he set aside, "taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7).

In contrast to the way David treated Bathsheba, let's listen together to a time Jesus' interactions with an unnamed widow also began with a look. This time it was a look of compassion and care as she found herself in a vulnerable situation. Luke 7:11 begins like this:

> Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. **12** As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. **13** When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."
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> **14** Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" **15** The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

This vulnerable woman in her time of grief is seen by Jesus and "his heart went out to her." He recognizes her dignity and respects her by speaking words of assurance. Jesus then uses his reserves of power and authority to bring the woman's son back from the dead. Jesus *gives* "him back to his mother." The way Jesus treats this woman and all the other people he encountered, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile, is the way we as his followers are meant to emulate. This selfless care for the vulnerable characterized the early church and has continued to be part of the mission of the people of God through food for the hungry, hospitality for the newcomer, care for the and for orphans, education, and community development work, all funded by generous offerings and tithes. With newfound awareness, we support abuse prevention efforts and aftercare for abuse survivors.

But unlike Jesus, those who attempt to follow in his footsteps do stumble and fall. That's why we have a time of confession in each worship service. God uses this time of facing the truth about who we are and who Jesus is to graciously restore the relationship broken by corruption.

We all need to come clean daily and admit, "I have sinned against the Lord."

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[5] Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight, (2020), *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture*, p.186.

Then I am restored to my rightful place: Jesus is on the throne, not me. We seek reconciliation with the ones we have harmed. We seek accountability instead of hiding our misdeeds. And we pray for the Holy Spirit to grow the fruit of self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, kindness, patience, peace, joy, and love in our lives.