

David and Bathsheba: The Way of Imperfection

1 Samuel 17:4-5, 8-10; 2 Samuel 11:2-5;
2 Samuel 23:3-4; John 15:4

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
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More stories are told about David than anyone else in the Bible.
Two stories especially are told whenever he is remembered:

The army of the Philistines and the army of the Israel have gathered for battle near the village of Socoth. The army of the Philistines on the hill to the east. The army of the Israelites on the hill to the west. The Philistine army parts and a figure walks forth on the valley floor.

And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of his coat was five thousand shekels of bronze.... He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel..."Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us...Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together! (1 Samuel 17: 4-5, 8-10)

And a young shepherd boy, David, hears Goliath's challenge and knows he is called to be that man. David goes forth and kills the giant and grows to become a great warrior, and Israel's greatest king.

And at the height of David's power, another story:

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 a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." 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..... The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." (2 Samuel 11:2-5)

And the story unfolds and unravels the life of a great man in the choices of a foolish man. A great life unravels in cover-up and scandal, the murder of Uriah, David marrying Bathsheba, and an afternoon visit from the prophet Nathan. Nathan tells David a fable of a rich man who seizes and kills a poor man's only and beloved lamb so that he can have a feast for his guests. David's anger rises against the greed and cruelty of this rich man. Nathan looks up, looks David in the eye and says, "You are the man."

The one who met the challenge, stepped forward to become a great man, now sits red faced and silenced with a lump in his throat knowing that he is so much less than the man that he hoped to be.

David is no one to emulate.

The stories about him don't show us how we should live but how we do.

The battles he wages in his life are the battles we wage in ours.

Like David, we too all have stepped forward to meet a challenge and so became more of the man or the woman that we long to be.

Like David, we too have stumbled, fallen hard and far short of the man or the woman that we hoped to be.

The question at the heart of David's story is not who is David?
But "who are you?"

The question, "Who am I?" is a question we don't like to sit with.
What I know is this:

I am less than I want to be.
I'm not at home with all that I am.

Instead, I fantasize that if only I could have this or that, do this or that why everything would be great.

I wallow in regret that if only I had made this or that decision why everything would be different.

And all of it – the fantasy about a future that is not,
the regret about a past that cannot be changed,
all keeps me from facing this: my life is a mixed bag.

No single decision about the future is going to change that.
No obsession over past mistakes and regret is going to make that different.
I'm a mixed bag.
We all are.
We're not all that we hoped to be.
We're not all that others wanted us to be.

And yet, it is in that mixed, that real, that human place that the stories of David tell us that we might have a chance, probably our best fighting chance to actually find ourselves; to discover that we are found by God.

When Nathan looks David in the eye and tells him, "You are the man", David's story could have ended.
We see it happen all the time:
John Edward's political career has probably ended after the revelations of this week.
We wonder how it will turn out for Tiger Woods. Can he become the hero we once hoped for him to be again?
And what about you?
Are you in a stuck place, having had your own humanity exposed or that of a loved one.
Do you too think that the story is over?

But when Nathan looked him in the eye, David's did not just give up, his life did not end.
He didn't get stuck in the rut of regret and shame;
he didn't believe that because of his folly, responsibility and the call to greatness now withdrew from his life.

In fact, it was only after only after having to face his own humanity that David truly became a great man as he learned to hold the all that he was. A great man who knew that God was not finished with him yet.

David held the fullness of his life together and wrote songs. We read the psalms, some attributed to David, others written in his honor, not because they tell how perfect life is but because they show us how our lives are. In their longing, they reach out for God and sing of a God who is present, looks us in the eye where we are.

At the very end of Second Samuel there are these "last words of David" that the choir will sing today in the offertory:

He that ruleth over all must be just, ruling in the fear of God.
And he shall be as light of the morning when the sun riseth,

Even a morning without clouds,
As the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. (2 Samuel 23:3-4)

These are the words of a man who looks at out on his life, the all that is life, and found peace.
These are the words of a man at peace, a peace I want for you and for me, for all of us.
To look out from our lives not as we wanted them to be but as they are and to find there God looking at us.

These are the words written by one who finally was “just” with himself,
Who forgave himself for having a human life,
These are the words of a man who is easier on himself,
easier on others,
because he has knows what it is to come through the dark night.

Ted Kennedy, who lived such a life of greatness and folly as King David, a truly human life, wrote at the end of his life, “I have fallen short in my life, but my faith has always brought me home.” (True Compass, Edward M. Kennedy, p. 505)

David shows us that way of faith.
A faith that says God is big enough to meet us here as we are,
to use us broken as we are,
to sing through us stuttering and stammering as we are.

Maybe, finally, David is someone to emulate.
He shows us to hold our beautiful and broken lives in open hands, to gaze on them with wonder,
forgiveness; responsibility and care.

To look up, and find the one who was not embarrassed to call himself the “Son of David”, looking at us straight in the eye, as he is, clear, loving, wondrous, and we know that we are found.

Amen.