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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 28, 2024

Proper 12, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Samuel 11:1-15](#)

[Psalms 14](#)

[Ephesians 3:14-21](#)

[John 6:1-21](#)

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It turns out even when you get a good king, they can go bad.

David was the boy hero, the shepherd boy who saved the Israelites from the Philistines by defeating their giant champion Goliath with a sling, the one the people loved, the one who loved God and built up the kingdom. Those were the early years. But now he's at the height of his power and it seems the position and the privilege have had their effect on him. Power corrupts, as they say. And there's something masterful about how the biblical narrator shows us David acting in the ways so many powerful people have acted through history and today.

He lives in a tall palace, taller than anyone else's—the narrator tells us he sees Bathsheba on her roof by looking down from “the roof of the king's house.” He never leaves that palace through the whole episode. The narrator tells us it's supposed to be “the time when kings go out to battle,” but David sends his officers to go on his behalf while he stays in his place of luxury lounging about. The narrator tells us it's “late one afternoon” when he rises from his couch to go for a little walk on the roof. And then he sees Bathsheba, this woman he wants, and although his people tell him she is married to someone else, again he sends his people to go and get her, and he coerces her, in a situation where there could be no thinkable way to refuse, into sex that is probably partly about his physical pleasure and partly about the pleasure of the power itself. It could be a story about a Hollywood producer today; or a president; or a religious leader.

And then as if that act of violence wasn't enough, he tries to cover his tracks, tries to hide the evidence, and ends by compounding an act of predation with an act of murder. First he tries to coax Uriah into a furlough and a conjugal visit that could credibly make him the father. But Uriah shows the sense of duty and honor that David has lost. Again the narrator gives us a masterful contrast between Uriah's military stoicism, sleeping rough with the servants in solidarity with his troops still on the battlefield, and David's luxury and his wine parties. And when David can't get Uriah to bend, he resorts to one last act of trickery and sends Uriah home carrying his own execution order. A good man dies so that David's first sin can stay secret, and David's second sin is even worse than the first.

Being king can be good for the ego, but bad for the soul.

And I find myself thinking about our place and time, where we don't have a king but we certainly have leaders of all kinds who hold great power, who sometimes succumb to the temptations of that power for ego and luxury and manipulation of others.

And then I look at our gospel story about Jesus, who fed the people in the wilderness. He did it not by a decree from a palace but by lifting and blessing and breaking loaves with his own two hands. They were barley loaves and fish, the everyday food of the poor, not a wine-soaked royal banquet, and yet everyone had more than enough. And "when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." He walked away. He didn't choose that kind of kingship, even though he was a king of another kind. He didn't need the palace or the scepter, or the business card, or the corner office, or the White House. He transformed the world not from the center of power but at the grassroots, literally, sitting with the people on the green grass, teaching, healing, feeding. Which is perhaps one description of what the church is for. There's more to it probably, but it's not a bad one: teaching, healing, feeding, with Jesus.

And I think of us right now as we are in an election year. And we will rightly devote a lot of time and attention to choosing this country's next leader. And a great deal depends on it, and sometimes the news and the stakes can feel all-consuming. And we need governments and leaders, or at least we have not figured out as a species yet a way to get along without them. And so we rightly try to get the best ones in place we can find, and to create the best systems we can to make them act more like public servants and less like, well, less like David in this story. We need checks and balances. We need accountability and term limits and leaders who are not above the law. And also with all of that, I think our scriptures today say to us: it's not always about who the leader is. Having the right one might help us but it won't save us. Even putting a good one in doesn't guarantee they won't be like David, corrupted by the position itself. But God isn't at work only in the palace, only in the capital, only in the halls of power. It's David, not God, who stays there. God is out with Uriah in his tent, with Bathsheba on her rooftop, with the people hungry for bread in the wilderness. And that's where we are too.

Our call as the church is to do what Jesus does, in our own bumbling and inadequate way to be sure, but acting as his body and touched by his Spirit: being the church. If we had the best leader in the world they still couldn't do it for us and the worst in the world can't stop us—and a lot over the centuries have tried. Teaching, healing, feeding. Using what's on hand: simple food and drink; a small child willing to share. Sitting down together, a mixed multitude, people of all kinds and backgrounds. Coming together around the scriptures to pray and listen and share our lives and be transformed. It seems little but it's big, like five barley loaves and two fish, like a little gesture of breaking and sharing that somehow continues and continues and continues beyond all possibility, until the thousands are fed, and filled, and the bread just keeps coming, and the baskets overflow.