

20 September 2015

Morality Tale or Story?
2 Samuel 11-12, selections

We have a long scripture reading today so we need to skip around a bit. We begin in 2 Samuel 11, just after David has been made king of all Israel. We read verses 1-5.

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.

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. 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 fetch 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.'

This was inconvenient – when Bathsheba's pregnancy began to show, everyone would know she had betrayed her husband, who was one of David's officers. So David brings Uriah, her husband back from the front lines for a furlough. But, in solidarity with his troops at the front, Uriah doesn't go visit his wife; he sleeps outside. We pick up the story at verse 13:

On the next day, 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. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. 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.'

As usual, the cover-up is worse than the original crime. To hide his adultery with Bathsheba, David has her husband killed. This is the word of God for the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

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Last week, I said that the Bible should not be read as a science book. This is a fairly important rule of communication and interpretation. To understand any book, you need to have some idea what kind of book it is. If you get that wrong, you misunderstand. If you read a novel as if it were a history, you miss the point, because you're looking for different things. If you read a book of poetry as if it were a cookbook . . . well, you see what I mean. So it's important for us to know what *kind* of writing the Bible is, and what kind of writing it is not. It's not a science book, and if you read it looking for science, you may find something there, but it will probably be bad science, and in the process you will miss the deep truths that really are there.

And here's another kind of writing that the Bible is not: it is not a morality tale. Let me explain what I mean by that term. There is a genre of writing whose whole purpose is to illustrate right and wrong behavior, and to encourage the former. Good characters in these tales are *very*

good and always do what is right and are vindicated in the end. Bad characters are *very* bad and either come to a sticky end or, sometimes, learn a heart-warming lesson and change their ways. The most obvious examples of morality tales are in books for small children – books with titles like *Sammy Squirrel Meets Bully Bear* – and you know even before you start that the bully’s going to learn a lesson about not being such a meanie. But it isn’t just children’s books. Actually, a lot of books function as morality stories. Think *A Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge learns a meaningful lesson and becomes suddenly a good person. Think the entire genre of so-called “Christian Fiction,” in which characters are either good or bad, and often don’t appear as real people at all but rather as abstract concepts like virtue or generosity or pride or anger, and the story itself is really an object lesson on being more virtuous and generous and less proud and angry.

That’s what I mean by “morality tale,” and that’s exactly how many – perhaps most – people read the stories of the Bible. They assume that the purpose of scripture is to illustrate and encourage virtuous behavior, as exemplified by the Bible’s heroes. The good characters are always good; the bad ones always bad. Really, they aren’t people at all; they represent virtues to strive for. Abraham represents faith; Moses, justice; Joshua, trust in God’s victory; Mary, meek obedience; Paul, passionate commitment, and so on. That’s how we tend to read the Bible’s narratives. And we could not be more wrong.

So let’s talk about King David. In 1 Samuel 13, after King Saul had proven a disappointment, God tells the prophet Samuel that he has chosen a new king, “a man after God’s own heart.” That man after God’s own heart is David. And after David’s reign is over, scripture will measure every king by the standard set by David. Most fall short: again and again, the Bible sadly admits that this or that king “did not follow God with his whole heart as David his father did.” But that idea of David as the ideal would appear to be based on selective memory. As you just heard, one spring David sent his troops off to war while he stayed behind in Jerusalem with his many wives and concubines. Nevertheless, when he saw a desirable woman whose husband was off at war, he simply took what he wanted. Then, when she got pregnant, he tried a cover up and ultimately had her husband killed to avoid discovery. There’s an ideal for you. And it’s not just adultery and murder. The David we meet in scripture was also a devious manipulator of others, a terrible father who played favorites and held grudges and disciplined erratically or not at all. He used people and then deserted them and is responsible for the nastiest last will and testament in the Bible, in which he gave his son Solomon a hit list of all the people David wanted him to kill after he was gone. David was not, actually, a good person.

Like I’m not actually a good person. And you aren’t.

And it’s not just David. Abraham an example of faith? Sure, he trusted God – when all his other options were exhausted. Like we do. Moses an example of justice? Well, yeah, except for the times when he lost his temper. The *many* times he lost his temper. Like us. Joshua an example of trusting God for victory? Sure, not counting the time he got smug about how great he was, tried to win a battle on his own and got his tail handed to him by a much smaller army, or the time he made a military alliance with the enemy by accident. (Yeah, he did that.) In fact, there are no paragons among the Bible’s heroes. They are all unfortunately just like us: weak, stubborn, ignorant, selfish weasels with attention deficit disorder.

So, back to David. What makes him a hero? What makes him a “man after God’s own heart”? This does. After he had successfully wrapped up the murder of Uriah and married Bathsheba – What a guy! Taking care of the war hero’s widow! – he got a visit from Nathan, a prophet of God, who bluntly confronted David with his sin. And David didn’t have Nathan quietly killed to shut him up. Instead, confronted by Nathan, David admitted his sin, knelt before God, and repented. The psalm we read earlier in the service, Psalm 51, is David’s cry of shame and plea for forgiveness and change. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

Does David’s repentance make everything all better? No. Uriah’s still dead. Does David get off scotfree because he said he was sorry? No, he still has to face the consequences of his sin. Does David become a changed man? Not entirely, no. As I’ve just pointed out, there’s plenty of sin still to come in his life. So how is he a “man after God’s own heart”? Here’s what I think. It’s not that his heart is just like God’s. Rather, it’s that his heart never strays so far from God’s that it cannot return and seek God again.

Here’s what all this means for reading scripture. The Bible isn’t interested in paragons of virtue or cautionary moral tales. The Bible is interested in people, people with all their weakness, people who make mistakes, misunderstand, act rashly, blow their tops, sulk, and hold grudges. The way we do. The Bible isn’t interested in heroes but in frightened people, doubting people, difficult people, and bad parents. Like us. And the Bible is most interested in those people when they turn to God and say, “I screwed up again. Can we start over?” Because to God, starting over is the very breath of life.

So don’t read this book to see how perfect people act; read it to see how imperfect people who are trying to follow God respond when they blow it. Do not read this book looking for role models, people on whom to base your life. They just aren’t there. With one exception: Jesus himself. Feel free to model your life on him. Feel free to love others as he loved them, speak unpopular truths as he did, confront hypocrisy as he did. Feel free to live as he lived. But remember this: just because you’re imitating Christ doesn’t guarantee that everything will go well for you and you’ll live happily ever after. This is no morality tale. This is real.