2 Samuel 11 and 12, selected verses and Psalm 51
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More Than…

Last week we heard the people renewing their covenant with God, promising once more to love, serve, and worship God above all others. And we heard Joshua's skepticism about the people's ability to do just that. Following Joshua's death, the tribes of Israel live under the rule and guidance of Judges, which does not go as well as one might hope. The final verse of the book of Judges tells us that the different tribes have gone their separate ways and that "In those days there was no king in Israel; [and] all the people did what was right in their own eyes."[1] The narrative thread picks back up in 1 Samuel when we hear the people pleading with God for a king, like their neighbors have. Through the prophet Samuel, God details why having a human king is a bad idea, insisting that a king will take and take and take some more. Eventually God relents, and the people get what they ask for. Saul is crowned as their first king. David is the second.

Our story for this morning takes place long after David the last born and all but overlooked of Jesse's sons is chosen to lead after capturing God's heart. David is exuberant and devoted, a courageous warrior who dances and sings with abandon. He is one of the most prominent figures in all of scripture. And he stumbles in outsized ways as well.

At the pinnacle of his reign, scripture tells us that David stays home and sends his soldiers off to battle. With too much power and time on his hands, David paces on his rooftop.

[1] Judges 21:25, NRSVue

From there he sees Bathsheba bathing. She is the wife of Uriah, one of David's most valiant and loyal soldiers. David decides on the spot that he wants her for himself and he sends a servant to bring Bathsheba to him, blowing right past the commandment about not coveting a neighbor's wife. After their encounter, David sends her back home. She soon sends word to David that she is pregnant, and he devises a plan to cover his tracks by bringing Uriah home from battle to spend time with his wife. Uriah sleeps on the floor of the palace instead. David tries to trick Uriah once more, but Uriah falls asleep without going home. In desperation, David sends a letter carried by Uriah to his commander Joab in the field. The letter directs Joab to place Uriah on the front lines and then draw back, leaving Uriah exposed. Joab does the king's bidding, and Uriah is killed, meaning David has effectively broken a second commandment. After a time of mourning, David takes Bathsheba into his household and makes her his wife.

Before we read about what happens next, I need to say how worn out I am by this text and how tragically relevant it is in the year of our Lord 2026. It reads like the absurd plot of a soap opera, but it is truer to life than I want to admit. Like the king God warned the people about, David takes what he wants when he wants it. Full stop. While artists throughout the centuries have depicted Bathsheba as a temptress, that description is not in the biblical record. What *is* in the biblical witness is the story of a powerful man deciding that a woman is his for the taking. To be very clear, no human is for the taking, by a king or by anyone else, ever. No human being is created to be anyone's possession or property. Period. We belong to one another as members of the human family. We in the church belong to Christ's body, as his and one another's beloved siblings. We belong to the God who creates us and every other human

being in his image, the same God who names us and claims us and comes to us in Jesus to show us how much God loves us face to face. Stories like this one are troubling and disturbing to say the least. And if Bathsheba's story rings true for you or someone you love, please know that the other pastors and I are here to listen, to pray, and to make sure you are heard and supported and safe. You are loved and treasured by God and by me and by us. Always. [Read 2 Samuel 11: 27b-12:1-10, 13]

The cynic in me is tempted to wonder if David would have come clean if Nathan hadn't confronted him, but the only story we get is that when faced with the horror of what he's done, David confesses. And he is forgiven. In between the confrontation and the forgiveness comes Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy,
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.[2]

Have mercy on me, O God. No finger pointing. No deflecting. No excuses. No scapegoating. No dodging. When confronted with the gravity of his sin, David leans on God's mercy and begs for God's forgiveness. Amid my weariness with powerful people behaving badly and treating other human beings as playthings and pawns, this moment in David's story stops me in my tracks,

[2] Psalm 51:1-2, NRSVue

because it is so unlike the stories I currently see playing out in our community, in our nation, or on the world stage right now. David confesses and pleads for God's forgiveness. It is not a half-hearted or performative confession for show or for ratings as far as I can tell. It is genuine, which makes it rare and refreshing. And God forgives him. Forgives. David. The king who takes and takes some more. I know David holds a special spot in God's heart, and David's confession is as big and bold as he is, but that is not why David is forgiven. David is forgiven because that is what God does, because that is who God is.

A few weeks back we talked about the first part of the big question asked of confirmands and every new member who joins this church family. The question begins with the phrase, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God." In other words, as we discussed in confirmation class last week, grace comes first, mercy comes first…and last and in the messy middle too. And that trust is the secret (or not-so-secret) sauce that clears the way for me to do my faithful best to confess where I fall short and to do my faithful best to turn from sin. And David knows this. David trusts God and leans on God's mercy. David also knows that only God can redeem him. The God who created David's heart to begin with is the only One who can re-create his heart and return him to the joy that is life with God, in step with what God calls for and commands. David knows his beginning again depends not on a hack or a shortcut, but on God.

God forgives David and—amazingly enough—God also forgives me. I'm not sure which is more challenging for me to wrap my head around. Each Sunday when one of us extends the call to confession and pours the water, I am quick to embrace the truth that all fall short of the glory of God. That is an easy sell. I see it in the world, and I see it in me. It is more difficult for

me to comprehend that God forgives my failings when I can't find a way to forgive myself. I confess that I am often stingy with God's grace for me and for those I have decided are—or should be—beyond the lunge, reach, and grasp of God's grace. That's the catch, though: not one of us, not one of them is beyond the lunge, reach, or grasp of God's grace.

To be very clear, grace is not a free pass. I do not believe God looks away when children go hungry, when seniors struggle to choose between medications or heat or groceries, when cruelty passes for entertainment, or when name calling, hatred, and harassment become routine. While God washes away our sin, humanity does have to live with the consequences of our wrongheaded choices and our wrong-hearted ways. David does too. Nathan makes it clear that David's glory days are done. Violence and turmoil will plague his house and his descendants. Choices have consequences. All the grace and forgiveness in the world cannot change that. We are called to trust in the gracious mercy of God, ***and*** we are called to "turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world."[3] God's astounding and persistent grace enables us to confess. That grace also empowers us to do better, to work more intentionally alongside God for the world God is trying to bring into being, which means coming alongside those who are fallible, sin-prone, and broken, just as we are.

Writer and activist Bryan Stevenson has spent years defending people who are behind bars for horrible crimes, intentionally placing himself in spaces with those who have broken any number of commandments and who are staring down the consequences of those actions. In a speech at Virginia Commonwealth University a few years ago, Stevenson spoke about the

[3] From the first question new members and confirmands are asked when they join the church

broken people he represents within a broken system and the hope he finds even there. He contends that:

> 'It is the broken among us that are going to lead us to mercy and justice. It's the broken who understand the power of redemption'…More than anything, Stephenson added, is the lesson that all of us are 'more than the worst we've ever done.'[4]

David is a sinner, as am I, as are you, as is every other human on the planet. And, we are not simply sinners. David and I and we and they—whoever they may be—are all more than the worst we have ever done. We fall short and miss the mark and hurt one another and break God's heart in any number of ways. AND, by the gracious mercy of God, we are also loved, forgiven, and freed, freed not to do what is right in our own eyes, but freed to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven by the one holy God, giving thanks to the One who knows better than we do that we are more than the worst we have ever done.

We ended last week's confirmation class with words we repeat every week in here: *Friends believe the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.* Are. Present tense. Here and now. So that we can let go of what we have done and what we have failed to do. So that we can turn our backs on all that tempts us to turn our backs on God and neighbor, so that God can return us to the joy of his saving ways, so that God can empower us once again as broken and beloved co-conspirators in the holy work of loving God's broken and beloved world in God's name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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[4] https://news.vcu.edu/article/At_VCU_Just_Mercy_author_Bryan_Stevenson_reminds_us_we_are_more