

"Nothing Stays Hidden Forever"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
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2 Samuel 11:1-13
2 Samuel 11:14-26

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¹In 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. ²It 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. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴So 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. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

⁶So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" ¹¹Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and

my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.” ¹²Then David said to Uriah, “Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.” So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David 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.

2 Samuel 11:14-26

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In 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.” ¹⁶As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well. ¹⁸Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting; ¹⁹and he instructed the messenger, “When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, ²⁰then, if the king’s anger rises, and if he says to you, ‘Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? ²¹Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?’ then you shall say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.’” ²²So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. ²³The messenger said to David, “The men gained an advantage over us, and came out against us

in the field; but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. ²⁴Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.” ²⁵David said to the messenger, “Thus you shall say to Joab, ‘Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it.’ And encourage him.” ²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD,

I. Introduction

Well it's nice to be back worshiping with you all this morning! I especially appreciate the emails that I got from the church family hoping that I'd get a chance to rest over these last couple of weeks. Of course, getting "rest" quote unquote isn't easy when your two-year-old female puppers loses her reproductive rights and your vet tells you that it is important to keep an eye on her activity, especially when she has an older sister and an older brother with whom she loves to play. And things aren't made any easier when the outdoor house painting that you hoped would be scheduled for the week of the 29th of July starts one week later, the day after the puppy's pain-killing medication ends, so that the fur babies are mostly trapped inside the house (or taken to the church office) with the consequence that they have some pent up energy they need to dispel. And of course this had to be the year when the old classroom furniture at Bethel was taken away, which means that last week, during our back to school time without students, I was rearranging my classroom furniture in addition to getting my school syllabus printed and the first week of school planned. Still, I had no homework to grade and no tests to

create, and that won't start in earnest until class schedules and class rosters are finalized the day after Labor Day. And if you remember, say a prayer for the teachers and students who go back to class on Monday August 19th. Believe me when I say we'll all need your prayers.

Of course, getting back to school tomorrow means that we've got to get back to 2 Samuel today, since we left off in 2 Samuel 7, where David wants to build a house for the Lord but is told by Nathan that it wasn't going to happen until Solomon, David's son, ascends to the throne. That in turn raised a question for us, because the material in Judges and 1-2 Samuel seems to say that a house for the Lord already existed in Shiloh (Judges 18:31 ["house of God"]; 1 Samuel 1:7, 24; 3:15; 2 Samuel 12:20 [all "house of the LORD"]). And one of the lessons from that sermon for us was the fact that even though David, and you, and I, sometimes have ideas, wishes, and aspirations that don't fall into alignment with God's plans for our lives, we can take comfort in the fact that God is still with us, even when we are mis-taking our pride and our ego for God's direction in our lives. But as we will see today, the fact that God is always with us is a two-edged sword. So let's see how that works in our lesson for today.

II. Pivot to 2 Samuel

2 Samuel 11 introduces one of the more troubling sections of the Old Testament, as we will see when we continue the narrative next Sunday. Not only is the narrative troubling, American Christians often misread it because our western cultural and social norms do not align with the eastern cultural and social norms that are implicit in the narrative (e.g., E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes [IVP Press, 2012], 120-28). So while the outline of the story's narrative is clear and straightforward, the message of the story needs a little unpacking. So let's start unpacking the narrative and see where that leads us.

The narrative begins in verse 1 with the statement, "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." While some scholars see the absence of David at Rabbah as evidence of his dishonor ([Misreading Scripture](#), 121 ["David was not where he was supposed to be.... David is not acting honorably as the king"]), it is worth noting that this has happened before; in 2 Samuel 10:7, we read that David "sent Joab and all the army with the warriors" to fight against an army of 33 thousand soldiers and only later, in verse 17, does David himself go out to the battle ("When it was told David, he gathered all Israel together, and crossed the Jordan, and came to Helam. The Arameans arrayed themselves against David and fought with him," verse 17). Hence, a majority of scholars see this as the normal procedure for a king: send out the army with its leader, and only if the situation warrants it will the king join the army in battle (so, e.g., Smith old ICC 317 ["The siege of a walled town was a tedious matter, so that David can hardly be blamed for remaining at Jerusalem"]; Anderson WBC 153 ["The comment that David remained in Jerusalem, for reasons unknown, is not necessarily a condemnation of him"]; McCarter AB 285 ["David's decision not to accompany the army is not disgraceful in itself. It may have been made in the spirit of 21:15–17 or for other reasons"]; Campbell FOTL 114 ["As noted, in the preceding chapter Joab led the army against the initial coalition (10:7) and David took the lead when an apparently more major engagement loomed (10:17). It may therefore be quite appropriate for Joab to lead what may have been minor mopping-up operations. David's remaining in the city may be a sign of the administrative demands of a complex kingdom, coupled with the capacity to delegate authority"]; Auld new OTL 453 ["At the beginning of the new campaigning season, Joab returns to do battle in Ammon. And this time it is actually stated that David stays on in Jerusalem. However, even this detail (11:1 = 1 Chr 20:1) is only rendered problematic or suggestive in the context of the new story spun from it. We may assume that David stayed in Jerusalem the first time he sent Joab to Ammon (10:7). It was only because David subsequently become involved in the second stage of that campaign that the narrator found it useful to note the next time David dispatches Joab that the king himself is again uninvolved"]). This will later be formalized in 2 Samuel 21:15-17, where we read, "Then David's men swore to him, 'You shall not go out with us to battle any longer, so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel' (verse 17b) because one of the warriors against whom Israel was fighting had David in his sights and wanted to kill the King (verse 16). Luckily that attempt on

David's life fails, and his absence from the military fronts becomes the standard operating procedure from that time forward.

Still, that's an important detail, because if David *isn't* in Jerusalem, the rest of the narrative couldn't have happened. Why not? Because verse 2 tell us that in a moment of boredom, David "was walking about on the roof of the king's house (see 1 Sam 9:25 which states that "a bed was spread for Saul on the roof"; might this also be the case for David?; see McCarter AB 298; Anderson WBC 153)" and "he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful." When did this happen? We aren't 1000% sure about that. The original Hebrew text says, "at the time of the evening" (לְעֵת הָעֶרֶב; only here in the HB, but cf. the anarthrous construction לְעֵת עָרֵב in Gen 8:11; 24:11; Isa 17:14; cf. also Josh 8:29, עֶרֶב לְעֵת הָעֶרֶב), and translations differ as to whether this means at the time *it becomes* evening, or the afternoon hours (NRSV 1985 NJPS, NLT, NJB), or whether it means during the evening time itself (NASB, NIV, online NET, NAB). Why was the woman bathing? We read about that in verse 4: "she was purifying herself after her period" in accordance with the law formalized in Leviticus 15:19, which says that "When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days." How did David manage to see her? That is also a matter of dispute. The phrase "from the roof" (מֵעַל הַגָּג) refers to David's vantage point, not the specification of where the woman was bathing, which means that we don't know where the woman was bathing. So did David spot her by looking through a window? Was she bathing in an area outside of the house but on her property? We simply do not know the answer to that question.

But see her, he did, and he saw that she was "very beautiful" (טוֹבַת מְרֹאֶה מְאֹד; elsewhere, only in Gen 24:16 [NRSV translates "very fair to look upon"]; 26:7 [NRSV translates "attractive in appearance"] Esther 1:11; 2:3, 7 [טוֹבַת

מִרְאָה]; Esther 2:2 [טֹרְבוֹת מִרְאָה]). And that is where the trouble starts. David exercises his absolute authority as king and sends someone to identify who the woman is in verse 3. Despite the NRSV's translation of the second half of this verse as a statement (see also 1985 NJPS, NIV, NLT, NJB, and NAB) in the Hebrew it is clearly a rhetorical question (so, correctly, NASB and online NET). Why respond to the king with a rhetorical question? Because it gives the king the opportunity to say, "Oh, of course. Thank you for your service" without implying that the king is less informed than a lowly servant and can bring the episode to a quiet close (so, rightly, Misreading Scripture 122) without any dishonor on the king for his lack of knowledge.

But of course, that's not how the story goes. Instead, David "sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her" in verse 4. Notice that "matter-of-fact"-ness in the narrative. There is no indication that anything is abnormal or out of line here. In the culture of Israel's day, the king does what the king wants. Period. No one questions what the king wants, not the messengers being sent to get her and not the woman who was sent for. And no one denies what the king wants, again, not even the woman who was sent for. Indeed, the narrative is careful to say, "she went to him" instead of "they brought her to him," which emphasizes her compliance with the king's orders (so Tsumura old NICOT 178 ["and she came to him may imply that Bathsheba consented to lie with him"]). And the consequence of everyone's submission to the king's command is that Bathsheba becomes pregnant and so informs the king in verse 5. This is where the comment about Bathsheba washing herself becomes important, because the fact that she was making herself ritually clean following her period means that the child she is carrying must be David's and cannot be passed off as Uriah's son or daughter.

In this way, verses 1-5 set up the situation that David tries to resolve in verses 6-13.

David sends for Uriah to return from the military front, spends a moment in casual conversation with him, and tells Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet (וַיִּרְחֹץ רַגְלָיו)" in verse 8.

Most commentators admit the ambiguity of the phrase, but the wider context suggests that this is David's euphemistic or veiled way of suggesting that Uriah have intercourse with his wife

(e.g., Anderson WBC 154 ["'To wash one's feet' may simply refer to a necessary refreshment after a long journey (see Gen 18:4; 43:24) but it could be also a euphemistic expression for sexual intercourse, as implied by v 11"]; McCarter AB 286 ["Isaac Abrabanel was probably right to take this expression as a euphemism for sexual intercourse"]; Tsumura old NICOT 180 ["it is possibly a euphemism for sexual intercourse"])). In that way, David would be off the hook because everyone would be inclined to believe that the baby was Uriah's.

But David's ploy doesn't work, because Uriah doesn't follow the suggestion to return home and sleep with his wife. Instead, he sleeps "at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house" (verse 9). When summoned to David, who asks him why he doesn't go to his home. Uriah gives his impassioned reply in verse 11 and says, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." That makes the situation more difficult for David. What is he to do now that Uriah states that he will not sleep with his wife?

David tries again in verses 12-13, inviting Uriah to a meal and getting him drunk, in the hope that in his drunken stupor he will go home and sleep with his wife, but that fails also; we read at the end of verse 13 that Uriah "did not go down to his house."

David is now desperate; if a sober Uriah won't sleep with his wife, and a drunken Uriah won't sleep with his wife, there aren't a lot of options left. David therefore instructs his commander Joab to set up Uriah to be killed by the enemy in battle. Joab is to find the fiercest place of battle, send Uriah to the front of that place, and then to withdraw from that area, "so that he may be struck down and die (וַיִּנָּכֶה וַיָּמָת, literally 'he will be struck down and die') in verse 15. And just like we saw in the earlier part of this narrative, there is no questioning, disputing, or denying the king's orders. Instead, like the obedient soldier that he is, Joab complies with the king's orders, and thus we read in verse 17 that "some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well." Note that it is not just Uriah that dies in the staged battle; there are others - we'd call them "collateral damage" quote unquote these days - who die as well. That is the message that is conveyed to David in verses 23-24, which ends with the messenger telling the king, "the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." David's response is predictable. He isn't angry, he doesn't mourn the loss of the servants who died, he does not blame Joab but tells the messenger to "encourage him" (וַיַּחַזְקֵהוּ; verse 25). And what about Uriah's wife Bathsheba? Verse 26 tells us that "When the wife of Uriah" - note that she is not identified by name but by her social position as the wife of the one who died - "When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him (עָלָה בְּעָלָהּ; some commentators over-interpret this to be a reference to "her lord" [e.g., Auld new OTL 459], but the Hebrew noun בַּעַל can simply be a reference to "her husband"; see BDB 127; HALOT 143; TDOT 2:182; NIDOTTE 1:682)," probably for a seven-day period (see Gen 50:10; Judith 16:24; Sir 22:12; so Smith old ICC 320; Anderson WBC 155; McCarter AB 288 [note that McCarter mis-cites Sirach 10:12 instead of 22:12]; Tsumura old NICOT 185 [note that Tsumura cites the Ugaritic text KTU 1.161 "where the

sacrifices were made on the first seven days after the king Niqmaddu dies and was buried"; for the text itself, see Pardee WAW 88).

And what happens when that seven-day period of mourning is over? "David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son" (verse 27a). So it seems as though all of David's machinations have been successful: He marries the mother of his son who is now a widow due to a "tragedy" quote unquote in battle; the child that he created with Bathsheba will be his; and no one seems to question what has happened.

Until we read the last half of verse 27, which tells us that "the thing that David had done displeased the LORD," and we will see next week what the ramifications of that little clause are. But for now, all's well that ends well, at least in human eyes.

III. Pivot to Today

There are a couple of observations to be made here, and both of them are relative to the power positions that we have. The first and the most obvious one relates to when we are in positions of power over others. The danger is that we become so obsessed with our power that we abuse it, and because we have it, people are unwilling or unable to speak against it for fear of some kind of reprisal. I've mentioned before from the pulpit that churches and church pastors are particularly vulnerable to this kind of abuse. During the COVID time, one church in Tennessee forbade worshippers from attending its services if they wore a mask (see, e.g., <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/07/27/tennessee-pastor-greg-locke-masks/>, accessed 17 August 2024). Now maybe during COVID you agreed with masking and maybe you didn't, but I cannot wrap my head around a church and its pastoral staff refusing to allow worshippers into their sanctuary *because* they wore masks. I saw an article in Christianity Today that lamented the death of an estimated four hundred worshippers because their pastors told them to fast until they saw Jesus

and "promised them heaven if they starved to death" (see, e.g., [After Fasting Deaths, Kenyan Police Find Dozens Buried on Preacher's Property | News & Reporting | Christianity Today](#), accessed 17 August 2024; article may be behind a paywall; a second article that followed this one is <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2024/august/kenya-shakahola-regulations-church-religious-taskforce.html>, accessed 17 August 2024; article may be behind a paywall). But obviously it isn't just churches and pastors who can have and abuse power. My alma mater, Wheaton College, fired its first tenured African-American faculty member in 2016 because she stood in solidarity with persecuted Muslims and said in public that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. That apparently riled some of Wheaton's donors, who allegedly threatened to withhold their financial support unless the college terminated Professor Hawkins (see, e.g., [Professor Who Said Christians, Muslims Share A God Is Leaving Christian College : The Two-Way : NPR](#), accessed 17 August 2024). And the Chair of the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Department at the University of Maryland allegedly secured \$19 million in funding and grants by fabricating data for research papers and on grant applications (see, e.g., <https://retractionwatch.com/2024/08/13/former-maryland-dept-chair-with-19-million-in-grants-faked-data-in-13-papers-feds-say>, accessed 17 August 2024). The abuse of power is nondiscriminatory: it can rear its ugly head everywhere and by everyone, as long as they have power to exercise. Hence my first question: where do you hold power in your life and in your relationships? And how do you exercise that power when it involves other people?

But there is another side to that, and that is when you see someone exercising their power in ways that seem wrong, questionable, or abusive. Will you, like the characters in our text who were not named David, obey without question or dissent? Would you, like the messengers sent to bring Bathsheba to David, do so? Would you, like Joab who was instructed to set up Uriah for his death, do so?

That's admittedly a much tougher situation to be in. I've always been an individual who values transparency. But not all bosses do. Before I became a math teacher, I was a mortgage underwriter, and a pretty darn good one at that. That meant that the time would inevitably come where I was instructed to underwrite loans in a dishonest way in order to secure multiple loans for the same borrower. I wasn't willing to do that; hence I got fired from my job. It would have been easier to go along, underwrite the fraudulent loan application as if it were honest, and everyone would be happy: my boss, the borrower, and my still-employed self. And there were other underwriters willing to do exactly that. Perhaps that is why the mortgage meltdown of 2007 happened.

More recently, the Oklahoma State Superintendent of Education initiated a mandate that required the Bible to be taught in social studies classes so that students could learn the importance of the Bible in the creation of American and Western values. That mandate has met with a lot of pushback from school districts in Oklahoma. Time will tell whether these districts are punished for their pushback - perhaps by teachers and district administrators losing their jobs - or not. But they too face the question of whether to be quietly compliant with the demands made by the one with power, or to speak out against the abuse of power that is manifesting itself in this mandate. And that raises the second question for you: how will you respond when you witness someone else's abuse of power? Will you stay quietly complicit and say nothing like David's servants and Joab did? Or will you speak up and speak out against the abuse of power like the Oklahoma school districts are? Which leads to the third question I have for you this morning. Jesus calls the church to love our enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27; compare Romans 15:15-21). When we are in the subordinate position of power, how do we

love the person who abuses his power? the pastor who mandates mask free worship when you choose to wear a mask? the pastor who implored your family member to fast until they saw Jesus and received entrance into heaven as the reward for their faithfulness? The state superintendent who seems to ignore the separation of church and state in his mandating of the Bible as part of your social studies curriculum? There are no easy answers to those kinds of questions, but we are foolish and naive if we think we will never have to grapple with them for the rest of our earthly lives.

So as we leave this place of worship, may the God who created the heavens and the earth guide us through the Holy Spirit in our use of power, in our response to the abuse of power, and in our loving response to those practice the abuse of their power against us, so that we may bring glory and praise and honor to our Risen Savior. Hallelujah! And Amen.