Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely

2 Samuel 11:1-15

A Sermon Delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, delivered on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2015.

Let us pray. Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable to you. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A story has been circulating on the internet about a motorist in heavy traffic, driving aggressively, cursing others and displaying offensive hand signals. A police officer pulls over the crazed driver and places him under arrest. Several hours later, the police officer releases him from detention, saying, “There has been an unfortunate mistake. Seeing the Honk If You Love Jesus bumper-sticker, the fish symbol on your trunk, and your behavior in heavy traffic, I assumed your automobile had been stolen.” Oftentimes, others are not able to tell we are among the faithful, because our actions betray us. This applies to David in today’s Old Testament reading and it applies to each of us.

Israel has twice defeated the Ammonite’s Syrian allies, leaving the Ammonites vulnerable (1 Samuel 10). Winter has come and gone. With the advent of spring, Israel has marched into battle to finish the job, causing the Ammonites to retreat to their fortress at Rabbah (present day Amman, Jordan). Joab, Israel’s Commanding General, has the royal city under siege, but the Warrior King (David) is on an extended vacation from combat, foreign policy, and domestic issues. Rather than fulfilling the duties of Commander In Chief, David is sleeping his days away and strolling along the palace’s penthouse balcony at dusk – a Peeping Tom! Perhaps David is over confident in his battle-hardened troops and God’s favor. Perhaps David chooses to avoid the hardship and boredom associated with the extended siege of Rabbah. Perhaps he prefers the comforts of the palace to a battlefield tent. Regardless, the author insinuates that David is in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Trouble is sure to follow; however, we are shocked to learn that the eyes of David’s heart lead to abuse of power, adultery, a non-consensual one night stand, an unplanned pregnancy, conspiracy and murder. David slew Goliath with his sling. Lust, with a good measure of arrogance, slew David with his own eyes!
I’m reminded of a mid-course correction from my Chaplain School roommate, who was an orderly priest. While walking through Newport, Rhode Island, on a beautiful summer Saturday in 1996, I was explaining that I had my wife’s permission to look at beautiful women, but not touch. My roommate explained that in the monastery, the monks were taught to practice *Chastity of the Eyes*. He encouraged me to divert my gaze to avoid temptation, saying, “The eyes lead to the heart, causing us to desire and to objectify, sometimes resulting in sinful actions and scandal.” Like a moth to the flame, we are drawn to scandal – the more sensational, the better!

Some may prefer the Hollywood version of David & Bathsheba rather than the historical narrative presented in today’s Old Testament lesson. The screenwriter would concentrate on the more sensual aspects of the story, filling-in the details that are absent in the author’s economy of words. The historian’s brush does not paint David (*Beloved* in Hebrew) favorably. *The Man After God’s Own Heart* (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) is also remembered as an adulterer, rapist and murderer. Our heroes (biblical, political, military, sports, and celebrities) are beloved. For those that rise from *Zero to Hero*, we idolize them and we are tempted to minimize their faults in relation to their accomplishments. King David, Presidents Nixon and Clinton, General Petraeus, Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, comedian and family-man Bill Cosby – history is rife with heroes whose accomplishments pale in comparison to their sins and ensuing cover-up. For David, all of this could have been avoided, had he immediately diverted his gaze and upon learning of Bathsheba’s identity, respected the marriage covenant between her and one of his mighty warriors, Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 23:39).

Arrogance, resulting from power and privilege, allowed lust to be David’s undoing. Prejudice against immigrants may have contributed to David’s lack of restraint. Surely an Israelite woman so beautiful should not be married to a Hittite! This intoxicating cocktail was the catalyst for a series of boundary violations that left David morally bankrupt. Bathsheba was no temptress out to seduce. In fact, she was devoutly following purification rituals, while David assumed God’s law did not apply to him! There is no hint in the text that her bathing was immodest. David wanted the whole package, vice a glimpse that he stole from his high vantage point. Bathsheba was powerless to refuse the King’s summons and his advances. She was raped - the object of David’s lust. Having satisfied his desire, David sent Bathsheba home. Absolute power corrupts absolutely!

Bathsheba sends word to the king, saying, “I am pregnant.” David now knows that sin has consequences. To be that sure of her pregnancy, a period of time must have
elapsed, creating greater urgency for David to quickly develop COAs (courses of action) to cover-up his indiscretion, before Bathsheba began to show. One sin is often covered by another and another, snowballing out of control. Summonsing Uriah from the front, under the pretext of an update on the siege of Rabbah, provides an opportunity for Uriah to lay with his wife. Battle Buddies from past conflicts, Uriah briefs David, but refrains from lying with Bathsheba, choosing instead to honor the warrior’s ethos. Uriah means The Lord Is My Light in Hebrew. It is ironic that actions of a man named Beloved will be exposed to God’s light! When Plan A fails, Plan B incorporates copious alcohol and the lack of restraint that often accompanies intoxication. Foiled again and drunk with power, Plan C involves conspiracy (with General Joab) to commit murder, resulting in Uriah’s death as a war hero and David taking Bathsheba as his wife, after an appropriate period of mourning. Absolute power corrupts absolutely!

In war and peace, our armed forces often take an operational pause to reflect on current events, review SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) and ensure safety is paramount. Throughout the narrative of David and Bathsheba, there is no ethical pause for reflection. I wonder, can we become so corrupt that we fall from grace? In Mark 3:28-30, Jesus tells us that all sins will be forgiven with the exception of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Can you be A Man After God’s Own Heart and a rapist, adulterer and murderer? We are by definition both saint and sinner. Like David, our sins of omission (being in the wrong place at the wrong time; sleeping on the job; a failure to divert our gaze; intoxicated by power; lack of prayer, study of scripture and worship) soften the beachhead, prepping the battlespace for sins of commission. Like the crazed motorist with Christian logos and symbols on their bumper, our actions often betray our faithfulness. We know the church to be a hospital for sinners – outsiders often see us as hypocrites who are very far from God. We all sin, some more seriously than others. Sins have consequences in this life that can be devastating to us and others. We confess. Depending upon our station in life, we may need to confess publicly in order to avoid further sin. We repent, turning away from evil and towards God. We receive God’s forgiveness. This is grace and it compels us to live lives in response to that gift. This is how it works in our relationship with God. In our relationship with others, it is much more challenging. We do our best to make amends for our sin, realizing that forgiveness by others may never come to fruition, relationships may be permanently damaged, and our reputations forever marred. Through God’s grace, may we avoid David’s mistakes and strive to be God’s beloved – patterning our lives after God’s own heart. Amen.