

Duty & Davids**2 Samuel 11.26-12.13a****August 1, 2021****The Rev. Scott Walters**

The other day, on a walk in the neighborhood, Ardelle said, "I wonder what would happen if I decided to give up duty for a minute?" Of course, I immediately worried that she'd go on to say she was running away to join the circus with a handsome new friend who swallows flaming swords for a living. Which didn't happen, I'm happy to report.

If it had, it would have been a much better story to begin a sermon with than that we went on a walk and Ardelle said, "I wonder what would happen if I decided to give up duty for a minute?" But, hey. Last week we stopped halfway through the story of David and Bathsheba, so there's plenty of story being served up today. In fact, as soon as the prophet Nathan shows up we have a story within a story, don't we?

It may have been because we were hearing about David and Bathsheba that Ardelle's question lingered. She was trying to put her finger on why different motivations, which all seem to be about how we go about leading an ethical life, can lead to very different ways of being in the world.

In the moment she chose the word "duty," because it was a word that, at least that day, seemed to be related to that part of the self that wants to be a good person. Or maybe that wants other people to see us as a good person. She was wrestling with the realization that when the goal is my own dutiful goodness...well...it's kind of all about me, isn't it?

Alright, maybe we'll come back to that walk in a bit, but let's return to the story. Because David and Bathsheba is nothing if not an ethical tale.

David has been taking shape as a complicated character for several weeks in our lectionary readings. We've seen him go from the handsome but overlooked shepherd boy to God's chosen one as Israel's king. We saw him as a sensitive musician and also slayer of Goliath. He was a threat to King Saul's ego and beloved friend to Saul's son Jonathan. And we watched him as newly anointed king dance into Jerusalem before the Ark of the Covenant, wearing a linen ephod. Which, I don't think I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, is not only rather skimpy, as his wife Michal pointed out, but it is also a garment worn by a priest.

So, if anybody has ever been the full package, it's David, right? David, the handsome songwriter and brave soldier and finally the beloved king who is also seen as some kind of priest, in a culture in which priests were hardly marginal. Priests were the ones who anointed the kings. Right about here one might ask, "Good grief, what *doesn't* this guy have?" To which the story answers: Bathsheba. And then we see that for all his accomplishments and accumulations, there is something frighteningly absent from David's moral self.

In last week's reading, in case you missed it, David had recently become king of the briefly united kingdoms of Judah and Israel. He was surveying all that he now ruled and saw Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, bathing on her roof. He wanted her. So, he went to her, got her pregnant, and then tried to cover it up. He gave Uriah a leave from his soldierly duties, assuming when he got home, he would perform his husbandly duties, and nobody would know Bathsheba's child was the king's. But Uriah was too loyal to his fellow soldiers and couldn't imagine spending the night in the arms of his wife when his comrades were out in the fields doing battle. So he slept in the doorway of David's house with the servants. The coverup was spoiled. David tried again, by getting Uriah drunk, but still to no avail. So he had Uriah himself carry a letter to his commander instructing him to put Uriah on

the front lines the next day. And when the battle got heated, he was to pull his men back, so that Uriah would be struck down and die.

By the way, if there's too much sex and violence in the Bible for you, there is a brilliant Veggie Tales cartoon on similar themes in which King George the Cucumber has more rubber duckies in his bathtub than he knows what to do with. But when he sees that a poor little spear of asparagus named Thomas has a duckie too, he won't rest until he has it. If you can get at the moral essence of a story with vegetable characters and a plot that turns on the threat of an asparagus getting creamed into soup, we're definitely in the realm of the archetypal.

Anyway, that's where we left off last week, and what sets everything up for Nathan the prophet's confrontation with David in our reading today.

One problem we have with this story is that there's nothing more pleasing than the downfall of a powerful person. Of all the plot lines of all the movies you've ever seen, how many of them involve somebody finally getting what he deserves, whether justice is delivered by way of blazing six shooters or falling anvils or that withering speech we all wish we could deliver in real time just once to put that person—you know you've got someone in mind—in their place. Best of all is when that powerful person's downfall comes by way of an underdog. You know. A David and Goliath ... kind of ... story...?

Wait a minute. What's happened here? Is David the new Goliath? Where's a boy with a sling when you need one to set things right?

We've been set up, haven't we? We've had our moral antennae all dialed in to a story we think we know. A story in which the moral universe is brought back into order. Good guys will be sorted from bad guys and we can tell our children that crime doesn't pay ... And then that's not the story we get at all.

Because David doesn't get what he deserves. Not even close. In fact, nobody in this story gets what they deserve, do they? Bathsheba is objectified and impregnated by a powerful man who has her husband killed in an attempt to cover up the scandal. Uriah wouldn't have died if he weren't such a virtuous man, who couldn't in good conscience enjoy an evening with his wife if his fellow soldiers were at war. Uriah's goodness is precisely what gets him killed. And all David gets for his lust, deception, and murder is a little fable about a lamb from a prophet, and a warning of family troubles down the road.

What gives?

Well, let me suggest that we readers have been set up for a reason. We've been set up because the deepest kind of moral transformation may not happen like we think it does.

The brilliance of the story is that we're all Davids. It's so easy to see what's wrong in someone else. Nathan shows David to himself only by making him think he's looking at someone else. Someone at whom all of David's righteous indignation and moral superiority is aroused to set things right. And then, what may be the most unbelievable thing in David's whole unbelievable saga happens. Nathan's fable works. David actually sees that he's the man he's just judged. More importantly, he sees himself in a way that may just be truthful enough for him to begin to see the people around him for who they are too.

David had a moral blindness about himself that blinded him to the humanity of the people around him. And this is our condition as well. When we couch the ethical or the Christian life as our duty to do good things or be good people, my virtue is something I'm adding to the resume I'm building along the way in life. For David, the resume was impressive. Good looks? Check. Musical ability? Check. Charisma? Check. Bravery in battle? Check. Wealth? Check. Beautiful women? Check. Political and religious power? Check. Moral uprightness? Nathan exposed David as he was trying to check his personal ethics box with that story about a poor man's lamb. David's moral outrage wasn't

about the poor man. It was self-serving. A relishing in being so much better than that, which is what almost all moral outrage is a form of. Everything was all about David, until he saw himself for who he was. And only when he saw himself truthfully did he begin to see the people around him for who they were, and said what we will move heaven and earth to avoid having to say: "I was wrong."

Isn't it ironic that when I look in on this story and get indignant that David doesn't get what he deserves, that's precisely when I become David. That's when I become the moralistic, judgmental person whose hypocrisy this story is trying to expose to himself, so that he...so that I can let go of the project of becoming a good person compared to the rest of you flawed human beings, and begin to see myself and the people around me for who they truly are. For this kind of truthful seeing is still the precondition for the healing God wants us to be part of in this world.

Ardelle and I kept wrestling with what she was getting at when she wondered if giving up duty might be a good thing. And she said, "It seems that when my goal is about wanting to be a good person or wanting to be seen as a good person, it turns into a really negative sense of duty. A vague worry that I should be someone else or do something else. As opposed to living a life that's truly focused on my fellow human beings. As opposed to a deep sense that I'm beholden to my fellow humans and to myself..." This makes so much sense to me that I typed it out to so I could pass it on to you.

When she edited this sermon as she always does (you have no idea the nonsense she spares you), she said I might add that we don't generally walk around unpacking the deep moral and psychological mysteries of life. If we do, it's probably a last-ditch effort to quiet the unhelpful chatter that started spinning so urgently in one of our heads at two o'clock the previous morning.

Friends, this strange, ancient thing we do here, gathering around these old stories and wondering together what they might have to do with lives like ours is not about becoming better individuals. Better Christians. Better Episcopalians. Better human beings. We gather around these stories and listen to what God might be saying to us through them because the world is still broken by our inability to see ourselves or our neighbors for who they are.

David's great, great, great, great grandchild will one day say that at the heart of what God hopes for us is that we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves. Don't you think that any meaningful love of a neighbor or of a self has to begin with letting go my dutiful self-improvement projects at least long enough to see those neighbors and see that self for what we all truly are?