

### **“How The Mighty Fall” – 2 Samuel 11:1-15**

I feel a bit like a combination of Robert Osborne from TCM and Wolff Blitzer from CNN ... on the one hand I feel the need to do a long introduction to today’s feature sermon, but on the other hand I will be offering ‘teasers’ throughout it for something yet to come.

You see, it’s deep into Summer, and the lectionary is suggesting bible texts that I have never preached on in my thirty years in ministry, mostly because I usually take vacation at this time of year. This year is a little different mostly because of the uncertainty of the scheduling of meetings and stuff for the redevelopment project but also because my boat still isn’t on the water – although, like the famous “wait-til-the-end” promises of CNN, we will soon feature “the Launch”!

Added to the challenges of preaching today is that the gospel reading is a selection from John’s gospel that is a rerun of what we have looked at in Mark’s gospel for the past three weeks, and if you don’t need a bit of a break from that sequence I feel a need not to try to dig something new out of essentially the same material for the next three weeks as well.

And so, I thought I would turn to the Old Testament readings for a change of pace, and wow! – another huge challenge. Not just from the subject of the readings but also because it will take three Sundays just to get the full story of what’s happening in the readings, and the full three Sundays to see God’s grace in the story. I expect to be here for the next three Sundays (although, “stay tuned” because the boat launch is coming right up in a following segment!) but I also know that not all of you will be here for all three segments, and so not only is a full introduction necessary I will have to ‘leak’ some “plot spoilers” each time.

As you hear, the Old Testament reading begins the story of King David and Bathsheba, a long, detailed, and somewhat lurid tale of adultery, intrigue, and even murder. That story is and has been the stuff of great Hollywood film legend, and is still echoed daily in TV soap operas – not to mention in real life as well! We are probably a little bit shocked by it, and might well wonder why this lurid tale has even been included in scripture. At first it wasn’t – it is originally part of a historical writing that has often been labeled the “Throne Succession Narrative”, apparently one of the finest pieces of ancient Hebrew prose that has been handed down to us. It was eventually included in the books of scripture without modification, and even survived intact the time when the Deuteronomic editors made great revisions to most of the other existing books considered scripture at that time.

Two main themes weave through this historical document. The first deals with the crucial question of who would or should replace King David, and deals with all of the likely and logical candidates one-by-one, including Saul’s sons and David’s sons. All are found wanting, except David’s son Solomon, which brings up the other main theme which is David’s decline and fall, an all-too-familiar account of human frailty involving someone at the peak of their power. Perhaps bored with his accomplishments, feeling a need to conquer something new, possibly feeling more than a little entitled to whatever he wanted, David takes the beautiful woman he spots bathing, and in spite of being told she is the wife of one of his officers has sex with her and gets her pregnant.

Compounding his folly, David now tries to set things up so that the officer, Uriah, has the opportunity to be home, where presumably he would also have sex with Bathsheba and thus would not be suspicious about her pregnancy. When that plan fails because Uriah has complete loyalty to his King and total identification with his troops and servants, David goes even further down the dark path and conspires to have Uriah killed – and as if that isn’t insult enough even has Uriah unwittingly carry the orders for his own death to his superior officer.

What makes this ancient story such rich fodder for modern movies and TV series is that it describes the kind of real life we can see around us today. All I have to do is mention a few names reaching back from a few weeks to many decades and you'll know what I mean: Tiger Woods; Gerry Sandusky / Joe Paterno; Silvio Berlusconi; Bill Clinton; the Kennedy's; MacKenzie-King. All of these figures share the taint of disgrace that accompanies sexual indiscretions of people in positions of power. And while the politicians, like King David, get major press over these activities they are not the only examples: Church leaders from Cardinals to Priests and Ministers are no different; neither are senior police officers nor anyone else in positions of power.

What seems to be common among such people – and more-and-more so among almost everybody today – is a sense of feeling entitled, entitled to have whatever they want, no moral or ethical questions asked. Whether the root problem is that people with this sense of being entitled comes from being put on a pedestal as we do with key leaders, or from putting themselves on a pedestal, the outcome is often the same – a disastrous set of self-destructive activities usually involving sex.

Public reaction to these self-destructive activities is often quite strong, and is proportional to the esteem in which the person was held. The more a person was respected and even revered for moral purity – for example a leading sports figure tagged as the 'model' for young people to follow – the more harsh is the reaction when they fall. Disgust and derision abound; the fallen figures become the target of late night jokes and scathing editorial blogs. Sometimes, like in the case of King David, the record continues to be read thousands of years later!

Is there any forgiveness? Can there be a path back to restitution and popularity? Yes, and yes. To see the forgiveness in the Old Testament story you'll have to wait for another couple of weeks. The grace of God, which many complain is largely missing in the Old Testament, does come shining through later in this story but it takes a while to get there. Like Wolff Blitzer, I'll offer the 'tease' "stay tuned - we will examine the descendants of David when we come back!"

Actually, we can flip the channel and jump ahead for a bit by looking at the two readings from the New Testament, both of which address these very issues of forgiveness and redemption. Both of these testify to the redeeming grace of God in Jesus, to the power of God at work in Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians Paul is dealing with the same kinds of activities that we have just outlined, destructive and self-destructive activities by those who feel they are entitled to do so. Paul identifies the root issue as being that they are Gentiles, and thus not familiar with the ethical and moral codes so deeply rooted in the Hebrew faith – although the Hebrew texts also show us a fairly consistent human failing that is not exclusive to the Gentiles. His argument and his fervent prayer is that these Gentile converts in the church at Ephesus could come to understand the depth and breadth of the power of Christ to help them understand that they are redeemed and forgiven, and thus can now draw upon Christ's boundless strength to turn and live a life pleasing to God.

John has a similar emphasis, focusing upon the power of God at work in Jesus, a power evident in the miraculous signs he is so easily able to display – signs of feeding not only physically but more importantly spiritually. John wants us to know that Jesus was not a "one-place, one-time" event but through the Holy Spirit is the very essence of forgiveness and redemption and empowerment to live a full and wholesome life pleasing to God.

So in both readings – and in the Old Testament as well when we come to it – we are presented with a mercy and grace from God manifest in Christ and empowered through the Holy

Spirit that is able to free us all from the chains of sin – like the sense of entitlement, for example – that bind and limit us. We are offered in and through Christ the freedom to come out of hiding, to stand up tall and respond to Christ's call to service. Part of that response is to recognize God's forgiveness of others and to respond in kind – to offer forgiveness to those who have erred and strayed. This does not imply that we are called to be complicit, to ignore sinful actions or to help cover them over or even to aid and abet – we are still called to speak truth for it is truth sets us free, and we will see next week how Nathan spoke truth to David and how that worked out.

In the meantime, however, we need to know that until and unless we can hear and accept our own being forgiven by God in Christ we will never be free enough to help others hear their being forgiven. This is the very situation against which Paul prays so fervently in Ephesians, that God “may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” His most earnest hope is that the Ephesians, and that we as well, “may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” It is only when we are indeed filled with all that fullness that we are both freed and empowered to help others come to the same realization, to know Christ through His love evident in us.

The lurid dramas of real life continue, and we are not immune. We too are not exempt from human frailty, from acting in ways that are less than honourable and less than pleasing to God and our fellow humans. But we do have hope, because we are forgiven, and we can draw upon Christ's limitless strength and power and upon the loving power of God to help us respond and live as he has called us to live, and enjoy the full and fulfilling life he has promised. We can join with Paul as he concludes his prayer: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”