

“Royal Family Troubles” – 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 – Aug 5, 2012

I hope you've been having as much fun with this three-episode series on King David as I have. I know many of you have been following along, but some of you haven't been here for the previous two Sundays, so if those of you who have been here will hang on for a second or two, I'll do a brief review so everyone's "up to speed" on this fascinating biblical drama.

We began two weeks ago watching David notice the beautiful Bathsheba bathing and then proceed to have intimate relations with her. She got pregnant from that encounter, and so David schemed to have her husband Uriah – a devoted soldier – brought home from the front in hopes that he would sleep with his wife thus removing any problems about this awkward pregnancy. Unfortunately for David, Uriah was totally diligent in his soldier duties, and refused to sleep at home while his fellow troops were in tents on the battlefield. David then gave orders for Uriah to be placed in danger in the front lines so that he would be killed by the enemy, which he was.

Last week we heard the prophet Nathan conveying to David God's words of displeasure with David not only over the adultery, which in the bible isn't the main problem, but especially over having Uriah killed and the way in which David caused it to happen. Through Nathan God complained that in spite of everything he had done for David, setting him up not only as king over all Israel but delivering to him all the spoils of that victory, David had turned his back on God and done these nasty deeds. As a consequence, God promised that he would raise up trouble in David's house and because of the way Uriah had been murdered that the sword would never depart from David's house. As the screen faded to black last week we heard David confess that he had done wrong.

That brings us to today's reading, but there is a LOT of stuff that has happened in the meantime. Has anyone read the intervening texts? Too bad, because it's the kind of stuff that happens in the best-selling novels that people pay good money to buy and read!

Immediately after David repented, he got a bit of good news mixed in with some really bad news from Nathan who said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die." Harsh words, which came true, but that was not the end of that thread. David and Bathsheba had another son, who we will consider in a few minutes.

The other pronouncements of troubles to David's royal family also came true. Again, at first there was success, as David's troops under General Joab conquered the Ammonites (the enemy used to slay Uriah), sent those people to work as slaves, and carted the booty back to Jerusalem. But then things went off the rails rather badly at the palace, as "some time later" David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar who was a full sister of Absalom, and in a plot that could provide inspiration for a dozen daytime soap-operas Absalom kills Amnon and flees to avoid punishment by David, who grieves mightily for his son who was killed (no mention of any grieving for Tamar, however!)

While in self-imposed exile, Absalom conspires through great wiliness and crafty guile to curry favour with the various tribes of Israel, eventually becoming strong enough to threaten the throne, and in a convoluted and complex set of intrigues involving religious and military leaders and spies hidden in wells Absalom sets out to do battle with David.

Whew! That's where today's reading takes up the story, recounting the outcome of the battle and the odd way in which Absalom gets trapped by a tree and is killed by Joab and his troops. David, as seems to be his wont, grieves mightily again for another son. We're finishing with David here, but needless to say the saga of warfare and bloodshed goes on for chapters yet,

and we can see that God's declaration that the sword would never depart from David's house was fulfilled to the end of David's days.

Not that David's royal family was the only royal family in history with troubles. It seems that almost every royal family had stories of intrigues, power struggles, sexual antics, and curious deaths that would fill pages of media. It shouldn't need to be said either that royal families are not the only families with long and complicated tales of dark deeds and other highly inappropriate behaviour. Some would have us all believe that the ideal family – the “Brady Bunch” kind is the norm, but in reality almost all – and I would say all – families deal with issues that they would rather keep hidden than to have penned into a book that would still be read thousands of years later.

To our ears the picture of God painted in this ongoing lurid saga of David and his family is not very flattering nor pleasant. We hear the pronouncements of death and ongoing trauma and wonder whether this could be the same God we know and worship, for he seems harsh and unforgiving and lacking in any grace. And yet if we read and listen carefully, and recognize that we are seeing God in this story through the eyes of people who saw warfare as a normal and natural part of both international and domestic affairs, we can see God in a way that is familiar to us. For example, when David repents of what he has done, we tend to hear the pronouncements of disaster but fail to hear that God changes his original verdict and lifts the death sentence from off of David.

But there's an even more significant indicator of God's grace even in the David saga. I mentioned earlier about a second son born to David and Bathsheba. We might leap to the conclusion that such a child would be a pariah, and be somehow an unwelcome addition to the family. The child was named Jedediah by Nathan, but was given a name much more familiar to us by Bathsheba – Solomon. Yes, this was the child who would grow into the one considered the wisest king Israel ever had, the one who would build the temple for and to God that would last a thousand years.

Even more indicative of God's grace, however, is the realization that throughout the reigns of three successive kings – Saul, David, and Solomon – each of whom managed to deeply offend God by acts of rebellion, throughout all of the disobedience and shenanigans and sinning by these leaders, God faithfully kept to his covenant with each of them. In all of the chaos and bloodshed and disruption God continued to keep his people in his heart and protect them as much as possible from their leaders and from themselves.

And of course the story didn't end there, nor has it ended yet. Out of that line of disobedient yet faithful people, as a descendant of David and Solomon came Jesus of Nazareth, the ultimate proclamation and implementation of God's unending grace. Out of a line of people involved in all of the foibles to which people fall prey – it's tempting to enumerate them, but I won't, because you know the list as well as I do – out of such extra-ordinary but also all-too-ordinary people came the One we confess and worship as Lord and Saviour. We, along with the multitudes who encountered him by the shores of Galilee and who have encountered him since then, acknowledge and profess and take shelter in the understanding that Jesus is the ultimate sign of God's eternal mercy and compassion and aching desire that we be reconciled to him. We proclaim, along with the more recent authors of scripture, that Jesus is the Christ, the one who will wipe away our sins and present us blameless before God when the time of reckoning comes upon us.

So then, how does such an understanding of God's grace impact us? What do we do with such knowledge and comprehension? Well, we listen to those who in the New Testament would

follow in Nathan's footsteps, bringing to people who will listen the words of God, words that provide us with guidelines as to what we should do with the knowledge that through God's grace we are forgiven and reconciled. Take our reading from Ephesians, for example, which has an excellent summary of how to live out the new life we have been given.

Live that life in supportive community – “putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Not a false and fragile life, but one that acknowledges the realities of interaction – “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” Echo the grace that we have experienced – “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”

What more useful summary of how to honour that grace and to live our new life could we have than the closing words of that passage – “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you ... and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

May God grant us the wisdom, strength, and peace to live life in such a way!