

## “Transgression and Restoration of Covenant”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; October 21, 2018

### **2 Samuel 11:1-6, 14-15, 26-27; 12:1-9**

*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. It 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. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So 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. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David.... In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In 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."...*

*When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When 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, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.*

### **Psalms 51:1-12**

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

*Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.*

*Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

*Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*

*Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Some years ago, the church I was serving embarked on an all-church book study, reading together *The Heart of Christianity*, which is among the very best summaries that I know of for the Christian faith. Author Marcus Borg makes a clear, passionate, and compelling case for the Bible as the heart of our faith, Christ as the heart of God, and justice as the heart of Christ's love in the world. Borg uses "heart" language throughout the book, and reviews all the ways that "heart" shows up throughout Scripture. He summarizes, "The heart...can be turned toward God or away from God, open to God or closed to God. But its typical condition is that it is turned away from God and 'closed.' The Bible speaks of this condition with a rich collection of synonymous metaphors. Our hearts can be 'shut.' They can be 'fat,' as if encrusted within a thick layer. They can be 'proud,' puffed up and enlarged. ...They are often 'hard.'" "The Greek word for this condition," Borg writes, "is *sklerokardia*: we have sclerosis of the heart."<sup>1</sup>

This heart sickness affects people in the Bible and today, even the best of the best of people. There's no better biblical example than what David does to Bathsheba. King David is known as the most righteous ruler of ancient Israel. After the Hebrew people fled Egypt and wandered in the wilderness, after they moved into the Promised Land and violently displaced the Canaanites there, there arose a series of judges and then kings who ruled over the people. David is the second king, triumphant in battle against Goliath and other Philistine enemies. David establishes Jerusalem as the center of Hebrew life, enjoys the trust and adoration of the people, and models righteous obedience to God as an exemplar of virtue.

Except not that last part, entirely. David's "sklerokardia"—the sinful hardening of his heart by too much wealth, power and success—is on full display here with the sexual conquest of Bathsheba and the deadly coverup that follows. David has every good thing already, but he goes after still more. In a time of the year when the proper thing for kings was to guide troops in battle, David instead remains in his Jerusalem palace. He sees a woman ritually bathing, purifying herself as righteous women did then. When he finds out that Bathsheba is married to another man, and though he already has a full harem that was the king's prerogative, David nevertheless takes advantage of Bathsheba and gets her pregnant. He then has her husband Uriah killed, adding the sin of murder to those of covetousness and sexual assault. This transgression—at the height of David's apparent success—unravels the covenant of trust between the king, the people and God, leading to centuries of civil war and the eventual dissolution of the kingdom.

Readers of this story have always wondered why David does this, why he goes out of his way to violently possess that which is not his, by deceitful means that violate Bathsheba's body and cost Uriah's life. I wish I could say, though, that the behavior is surprising. Such sinful abuse *would* be shocking, except we know to this day that wealth, power and privilege *often* lead to unjust exploitation and sin, including by those who call themselves righteous followers of God. We see it in the Christian evangelical pastor [Pat Robertson's suggestion this week](#) that "Going after Saudi Arabia for [a] journalist's disappearance [is] not worth risking '\$100 billion worth of arms sales'". We see it in the sexual abuse of children by Christian priests, sin multiplied further when it is covered up by bishops more concerned with the church's reputation than its righteousness. We see such sinful exploitation in the laws of this country, such as last year's tax law that gave 80% of the benefit to the wealthiest 1%, and in the politicians who will now use a ballooning deficit to justify further cuts to health care for the poor and the old. We see it in how brown bodies are banned at the border by those with secure homes and communities, for the crime of seeking the same themselves. We see it in how my ancestors claimed God's "manifest destiny" for European conquest, using fear, false promises and broken treaties to push Native peoples off the farmland where I grew up as a White boy. In each case, human beings who already have more than enough abuse wealth, power and privilege to take from those who have far less. All this violates God's covenant with humanity,

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 151.

heard here most recently in the Ten Commandments and summarized by Jesus as *love* God, and *love* your neighbor as yourself.

David's sin of arrogant trespass and abuse of privilege is so common to this day that I feel like saying with the prophet Isaiah, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (6:5). It is right that we lament and confess what we see and know. Anyone who has started down the Twelve Steps toward sobriety will tell you that honest self-awareness is critical to any healing. That's why Nathan the prophet's parable is so essential to David's self-awareness. Nathan is courageous in telling truth to power, risking his life by showing David how wrong the king has been. And to his credit, David recognizes Nathan's judgment as God's righteous word.

David confesses his wrongdoing in the prayer we know as Psalm 51. There is no better place in all of scripture that so plainly tells of the human condition, and of the "sklerokardia" to which we all are prone. "Have mercy on me, O God...blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." We know our transgressions, and our sins are before our eyes. We plead with God, "Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me." Atonement for sin begins with owning up to it, with facing the consequences of what we have done, so that God can put "a new and right spirit within" us. We yearn for the transformation of life with God rather than being buried forever under the rubble of past misdeeds. This is what David begs for in Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart, O God."

Our nation will continue to grapple for decades with our sins and those of our leaders. Prophets are rising up even now like the biblical Nathan to confront White America with its history of Christianity that endorsed slavery and Native American genocide, or with our own close experiences of powerful people abusing privilege for selfish gain. We will be most faithful to God if we are like David in one respect—if we are forthright and honest when confronted with sin. If we are like Nathan, summoning up the courage to tell the truth in the face of power. If we are like Bathsheba, maintaining the steady practices of righteous faith even though not in control, and at the mercy of unjust, heartsick leaders. Time will tell whether America has the courage to create a national reckoning, true *mea culpa* that is necessary for lasting repair and reconciliation with the poor, with children, and with people of color. As people of Christian faith, we believe even in the midst of sin that God *will* have mercy, show steadfast love, and cleanse us from sin. God *does* restore the joy of salvation, and sustain in us a willing spirit. Our Scripture tells one story after another of human error. But God nevertheless creates a mosaic path to salvation from the chipped pieces and fragments of each human life. As one proverb puts it, "God writes straight, with crooked lines." May it continue to be so, and may God have mercy on us in the meantime. Amen.