

First Presbyterian Church
2 Sam. 11:1-15, “Confrontation and Grace”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/28/2024

There’s a new commercial out where all the birds surrounding a woman’s building are actually surveillance cameras with wings.

It’s pretty weird, but I *think* they’re trying to see what she does on the internet.

But when she uses the highlighted web browser, the cameras all run into the windows and disappear, because that browser will protect her privacy.

Uh, newsflash: The internet is not a place for anonymous information gathering.

It used to be that what we wrote, read, and looked at on the internet was considered to be “anonymous.”

That it was a place where you could be anybody, explore the world wide web completely untracked.

If that ever was true, it certainly isn’t true anymore.

Whether it’s the NSA sucking up information, Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Facebook analyzing your algorithm, or someone hacking one of the many companies that have your private information with them, there’s no such thing as anonymous life online.

Now, AI will read what you wrote on the internet and then use it to answer your own question.

But the thing is ... we like the idea of privacy so much, we still act like it’s true!

We naturally like things that are anonymous and autonomous.

Anonymous: Ano (without) nym (name) = no name

Autonomous: Auto (self) nomous (law) = self ruling

Life with God is different ... it is transparent, open, and totally dependent on God’s generosity and grace.

But so often when we sin, we assume that our identity and activity are not known (or can be covered up), and that we rule ourselves independently from any other authority.
Anonymous and autonomous.

(Notice how this is very different from Alcoholics Anonymous,
which uses anonymity to encourage honesty, support, and trust in God.)

The story of Adam and Eve captures these tendencies in the human heart,
but within a world that we have absolutely no connection with.
Talking serpents, trees you can't eat from ... it can be a stretch.

The story of David's great sin against Bathsheba and Uriah
describes them in greater detail,
and with such clarity that none of us have any trouble
finding ourselves in the story.

David has been slowly drifting from the life of energetic prayer
and God-conscious exuberance that characterized his earlier life.

Eugene Peterson's got a great insight about the verbs used in the story
as David uses his power to take Bathsheba and then uses his power
to kill Bathsheba's honorable husband Uriah while in battle.

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"The passage begins with the curt phrase, "David sent Joab"; it picks up momentum when "David sent" to inquire about Bathsheba; the plot thickens when "David sent" and got Bathsheba. That these "sendings" constitute a ruthless exercise of power becomes clear in the cluster of "sends" in 2 Samuel 11:6, "So David sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David." After he had accomplished his cover-up, "David sent" for Bathsheba again and married her."

This reminds me of the insightful warning
which the prophet Samuel gave to Israel when they said they wanted a king.
He said if you get a king, he will (among other things)
take your sons and put them in his army,
he will take your daughters and make them serve in his palace.
In some sense, that kingly tendency is what this story is about.
This is an example of David, a good man, sensitive to the Spirit,
being conformed to the corrupting influence
that kingship on a human being.

We aren't made to wield great power over large numbers of people.
That's why so many people who do wield great power end up
involved in scandals and atrocities.

Even as people who lack a king's power to "send,"
I think we can identify with this basic impulse.
When we've been caught doing something wrong,
we use whatever resources are available to us
to distance ourselves from the truth.

We all create lies or stir up other issues or make counter claims
that put us as the victims in the situation –
anything to avoid the only things that will result in healing,
reconciliation, and restoration:
genuine vulnerability and intimacy.

There's just one problem with David's evasion tactics,
and it's the same problem that we have: God knows, and God rules.

Fittingly, the final use of the word "send" in this story belongs not to David,
but to God. 12:1 declares, "And the LORD *sent* Nathan to David."
This is the end of David's detour into playing God.
Only God is truly sovereign.

But what happens next is a surprise: Nathan preaches a sermon to David.

He tells the story of a man with large flocks of sheep
who needs a lamb for a dinner party.
But instead of using one of his own lambs,
he takes the pet-lamb of a poor man who lives down the street.

As he tells this story, David gets more and more...religious.
David gets drawn into the story,
he becomes indignant at the man's blatant injustice,
he's reminded of God's righteous character,
and by the end of it he's ready to pass a death sentence
on this power-hungry, lamb-stealing jerk!

Nathan gets David worked up about *someone else's* sin,
and *someone else's* selfish use of power and privilege.

It was easy to do, because (from his perspective)
David's own sin was hidden, unknown and compartmentalized.

This is the danger of being religious. We can be very upset about other people's sin while our own sin (personal and communal) is kept quiet.

This is the biggest reason for the credibility gap the church has with the world: They see us pointing out specks of dust in other people's eyes while we've got lumber sticking through our windshields.

At the peak of David's indignation with the man who was taking advantage of the little guy, Nathan flips the script and tells him, "You are the man."

In that moment, David realized that his lustful indulgence, his sending and taking, his murderous cover-up had been laid bare by none other than the Creator of the Universe.

After Nathan details the calamity that will fall upon David's lineage because of this, David replies, "I have sinned against the Lord."

But guess what? This is the *happy* part of the story!

Do you know why? Because that the sentence, "I have sinned against the Lord," is not a statement of defeat, but rather a prayer that is full of hope. It's full of hope because it's a sentence full of God.

The goal of faith in Christ is not to *avoid sin* (which is impossible since we are all sinners) but rather to *recognize* our sin so that we can look to God.

In this sense, we've often been let down by the church, because we've been told that our job is to eliminate sin (or at least tamp it down). But that's God's job, not our job.

David's willingness to recognize his sin is the happy part of the story, because that's where God's redemption takes hold, that's where David recaptures his identity and is drawn back toward the heart of God.

David's sin was enormous. Evil. With far reaching consequences. But it was easily outdone by God's grace.

There's a show on Netflix I really got into called, "Hell on Wheels"
about the building of the trans-continental railroad
and all of the dirty dealings that went with it.

The central character is a Civil War veteran named Cullen Bohannon.
Along the way we see that he's internally tormented
by the atrocities he committed during the war.

Cullen eventually finds refuge in the chapel, and a very thoughtful,
caring pastor connects with him and offers salvation & forgiveness
if he'll only kneel & pray.
"Not gonna do it." Cullen says.
"Why?" the pastor pleads.
"I don't deserve forgiveness for what I done."

This is where the audience is supposed to think, "Oh, that's so tragic!
He's the bad guy who's really a good guy,
but he's honest about how bad he's been ..."

In other words, he's Batman!

But that's not being tough or honest.
The line "what I've done is too bad to be forgiven"
is arrogant and ignorant.

Arrogant in that "I've done something so bad that even God couldn't forgive it."

Ignorant of the magnitude of God's grace –
the magnitude of the act of Christ on the cross.

Thank God that King David is not Cullen Bohannon or Batman.
He wandered deep into the shadows of sin,
but he was open enough to the word of God
to see that at bottom he was weak and foolish...
and utterly in need of God.

David's sin was a terrible thing, but the recognition of his sin
was a moment of salvation.

If sin comes from pursuit of anonymity and autonomy,
the redemption of God comes through public confession
and submission to God and our community.
God brought David into vulnerable connection with Nathan.
But he also brought him into a place of contrition before all of Israel
through what we know as the 51st Psalm.

We used the first six verses of this Psalm for our prayer of confession
earlier in the service.

Listen now to what David writes later in that Psalm
which he wrote specifically in response to his sin
against Uriah, Bathsheba, and the Lord.

As I read this, consider your own heart.
Be honest with God, recognize the moment of salvation
does not come from being sinless,
but from accepting your need of forgiveness.

Listen for God's grace to you on this day:

Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.
Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your
righteousness.