



[Click here to return to the Christ Church Home Page](#)

A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett©

Christ Church + Washington Parish

We've been reading from the saga of the kings of Israel for many weeks now, and it has gone largely unremarked from the pulpit, but it's very hard to pass by a tabloid-ready story like today's account of David and Bathsheba. In my seminary chapel, when we had a reading like this, instead of "The Word of the Lord," the reader would usually say "Here ends the reading," and the community would still respond "Thanks be to God."

When getting what you want trumps charity, integrity, decency, or, most certainly, morality, you haven't heard what God is saying in the story of David & Bathsheba.

It's a tawdry tale, isn't it? Little David, who won our hearts when he killed giant Goliath in single combat with his trusty sling, has grown up. And, as king of Israel and Judah (remember, he was a uniter, not a divider) he displays all of those virtues we have come to associate with political leaders: arrogance, adultery, betrayal, duplicity – a model ruler.

And notice how the reading begins: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle..." This odd phrase is essential context for this odd story. For you see, back when the Israelites began to pester God to give them a king, what they said to God was, "let us have a king to lead us into battle so that we can be like other nations." Israel's long struggle with God to have a king to rule over them was based not on the desire for sound government or the proper administration of justice, but on the desire to go to war like other nations in order to prove that they were God's favorites by conquering everybody else.

And God argued mightily with the people of God, telling them that they weren't called to be like other nations, that God, and not a king, would rule over them and lead them not into war but into peace and abundance. But the Israelites would have none of it. Like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, when given all the explanations about the impracticality of what they desired, the Israelites answered, "But I still want one."

And apparently God realized that experience would be the only possible teacher for these insistent folks, because Israel finally got a King. That was Saul, David's predecessor, and from the start, things didn't work out so well. The victory over Goliath

and the Philistines soon gave way to civil war, and when the dust settled, David sat on the throne.

And stayed here. It's the spring, when kings lead their people into battle, and although that's all the Israelites wanted from a king, David is at home, letting his generals and troops fight on while he stays in Jerusalem and falls in love with another man's wife, gets her pregnant, tries to cover it up by bringing her husband back home from the war to see his wife, and, when unsuccessful in the cover up, arranges the death of the husband in battle.

The story is, of course, ancient history. It's likely true, because what other reason could there be for preserving it? But we may well wonder if it has anything to do with us. Culturally, the Mesopotamian communities of Late Antiquity are almost impenetrably alien to us, And yet some parts of the story seem terribly familiar; terribly human: the way that desire clouds judgment; The arrogance of the powerful; The longing of the people to dominate other groups, to prove that they are the best; the inability to learn except from experience.

These are human traits, human experiences, and they dominate our headlines today, and are part of our own experience as well. We may be revolted that David would so abuse his power, but surely we cannot be surprised by it.

And so, I suppose, the message of the saga of the kings of Israel is the same for us as it was for them. God's hopes and aspirations for us have nothing to do with coming out on top, or being like other nations, or being like other families, or like other people if that means being involved in a struggle for power, wealth and dominion.

When you find yourself wanting your nation or community or church or family or team to "show them who's boss," you, like the Israelites, weren't listening to what God is saying in these stories.

When getting what you want trumps charity, integrity, decency, or, most certainly, morality, you haven't heard what God is saying in the story of David & Bathsheba.

When you are willing to support a leader, or a pastor, or a family member or a friend who doesn't respect the dignity of others, or who acts unjustly, just because, for all of that person's many faults, your interests are still being promoted, you haven't been paying attention to what God is trying to teach you.

But even that isn't the main point. The bigger issue is that if we cannot hear the stories of our ancestors and learn from them – if we aren't able to hear and heed the urgings of God in the stories of others, ancient or modern, then we remain a people who can only learn from experience. And if that is who we are, then we will continue to experience all the ills and evils recounted in scripture – the misuse of power, the arrogance of the

powerful, the dire results of greed and unchecked desire and injustice and inhumanity – in full force in every generation.

God is calling us to be something better than that. God is calling us to be made new, and that means learning not just from our own mistakes and experiences, but from the mistakes, experiences and examples of others.

Amen.