

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.25.21

2 Samuel 11:1-15

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. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back."

So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

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."

John 6:1-21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who

had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. (854)

There is no temptation story in the Gospel of John. This is one of those obvious things I only noticed this week.

The temptation story: it’s a foundational one in the other three gospels, the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It comes hot on the heels of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan by John. Following that, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness where, without food or water, he would be tempted by the devil, by the *diabolos*, which is to say one who divides, one who is divisive.

Matthew and Luke even get into the specifics of the temptations.

The devil (also called Satan, which is to say one who accuses, or the adversary) tells Jesus, who must have been hungry by this point, to make the stones found all around him into bread. By these he could feed himself. By this power, he could take care of himself, be self-sufficient, not so dependent on something like a God who promises he will provide. By this power, too, he could feed a hungry world, he could *seize* a hungry world—seize it and subjugate it. Strongmen have always known this trick. Give the people bread; and they’re yours forever.

Jesus resists this as temptation, saying that people don’t live by bread alone.

The divisive one (also called the accuser or the adversary) then tells Jesus to go up to the highest point of the Temple, and to throw himself off, though he of course wouldn’t fall all the way down. No, for God’s angels would bear him up, never let him fall stupidly to his own death. By this, he could demonstrate his special status, give the people a spectacle—for people love a spectacle, people will be enthralled by spectacle.

Jesus resists this as temptation, resists winning the world as thrall.

The devil (also called Satan) then just made it plain. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of this world, he declared that all of them belong to him, and he promised that he would put Jesus in charge of all, around the world and across all time, if Jesus were just to fall down and to worship him, the divisive one, the accuser.

And it's not a silly notion that the devil does indeed have authority in all the kingdoms of the world, all the powers and principalities, all the states and municipalities. If the devil isn't a figure, an entity, but is a dynamic; and if that dynamic is divisive, as the name *diabolos* insists it is, and if that dynamic is accusatory and adversarial, as the name Satan suggests it is; and if we can look at what generates the sense of kingdom or principality, nation or state or municipality, and see there a dynamic of accusation and the adversarial, a spirit of divisiveness by which comes a sense of thrilling unity: then we can conclude that all the kingdoms and nations and tribes and powers that generate a people do indeed belong to the devil, also called Satan.

I mean, who are you if not *not* your adversary?

Who are "we" if not "not them"?

Jesus resists this as temptation because the generative spirit by which he would exercise power isn't rivalry but love, isn't "against-ness" but "with-ness." For this he said, over and over again, "Woe unto this generation!" for so much in the world is generated by such woeful means. Blessed be the generation that comes of Christ, whose generating power is found in sacrificial love.

It was spring, the time of year when kings go out to battle.

Interesting that there was a season for it. Like our own spring cleaning, when we clear our homes of clutter and our yards of winter's destruction (downed tree branches, mulch scattered by the wind or decomposed into the soil) and repair our homes of weathered spots (replacing downed clapboards, repainting chipped wood, recementing pocked foundations), doing battle was also to refortify. Kingdoms needed to establish once again who the people of the realm were by going up against those whom the people of the realm weren't. Israel was best Israel when it wasn't Philistia. Judah was best Judah when it wasn't Ammon. Spring was the season for refortifying those boundaries: Israel going up against the Philistines, Judah going up against the Ammonites, and the kings of each of these taking charge.

"Charge!"

Redefine the boundary between us and them. Renegotiate it; maybe win some land, maybe lose some. And in any event, refortify the fact, the *crucial* fact, the **generative** fact, that we are "not them."

David, though, remained in Jerusalem.

Apparently, he'd become comfortable in his power. Apparently, he'd become so beyond reproach that he didn't even need to demonstrate his power or to defend his power. He could get others to do his bidding without even needing to lift a finger, barely leave his couch.

How had it gotten to be this way? David was once the least of the kings. Little David, [little David with his harp](#), the subject of a negro spiritual of this name, he's remembered as the boy with the slingshot and stone who took down enormous Goliath the Philistine. (Those damn Philistines.). Prior to that, he was the youngest brother of at least eight, the one whose father, Jesse, didn't even bother bringing in for consideration when the prophet Saul came along in search of a new king, someone to anoint to lead the people. David was out tending the flock of sheep, wasn't even worth bringing in from the outer edge of the grazing land of Bethlehem.

Now, so established! He couldn't even be bothered to perform the most basic of his duties, the merest of what it takes to be king. Going out to spring battle!

Eh, his soldiers would do it for him. They wouldn't even wonder whether he was with them, wonder about what he was up to. He was so great, so unquestionably great, that he was no doubt doing great things, great things.

He was ruling from his palace rooftop. While his troops ravaged Rabbah, David was laying on his couch and rising from it, wandering his palace rooftop, and laying claim to all his eye could see.

Namely Bathsheba.

Beautiful.

She was doing as she should—bathing on *her* rooftop, repurifying herself following menstruation.

It was the Law.

David sent for her.

He had sex with her and sent her home.

Then she sent to him, "I am pregnant," the only thing she's ever remembered to have said.

There's debate these days among scriptural scholars as to whether this is a case of rape.

On the one hand, Bathsheba was powerless to refuse the king's intentions, as any woman would be. This makes it rape in the minds of many.

On the other hand, rape as we understand it is a modern notion, and this is a pre-modern story of a pre-modern event, so to apply the term here is anachronistic.

What's more, rape is a crime, but what David did here wasn't a crime, as this was all well within his rights as king. Everything that falls within a king's realm is his domain, is of his dominion.

What's still more, the people asked for this. This is what they wanted. "Anoint for us a king!" the people clamored of the Lord their God (who had been their king, was to be their king). They said this to the Lord's prophet, Samuel, though he would warn the people of the way of kings. "A king will take your daughters," he even told them. "He'll make them slaves in his household or concubines in his haram." But the people insisted. "Anoint for us a king!"

So, they got a king—one first in Saul, who proved too merciful for the people's liking, now David, little David, little David with his harp, now so mighty a king he no longer had to do much of anything, he certainly didn't have to risk his life, he certainly wasn't about to sacrifice his own preference. He'd already done that, plenty of that. Now, he'd enjoy the seat of power as the comfortable seat it could be.

Not illegal, this; not a crime, for it was well within the rights of a king, but that doesn't make it right. Just because something is within your rights to do doesn't make it right for you to do. And this: this was indeed wrong, which even David apparently knew, given his moves to cover it up. It's not clear to me, though, which he meant to cover, the fact that he had sex with someone else's wife—and a soldier in his army no less!—or the fact that he was on his couch when he should have been taking charge, when he should have been among the first of those risking their lives for the glory of their king and the largess of the kingdom.

"Send me Uriah the Hittite."

David would send for him to come from battle, to come home; David would send Uriah to his home, to his wife, that *he* might sleep with her and believe the pregnancy to be his, the child to be born to be his.

But Uriah refused any such comforts as his own bed, his own wife. With the ark of the covenant remaining in a tent, and his lord and comrades in an open field, he could do no such thing as see to his own comfort.

Next day, David tried getting him drunk. But Uriah's strength of character withstood even that.

At last David would resort to the worst, sending Uriah to the forefront of the fighting, having his fellow troops withdraw, and letting Uriah be struck dead. Uriah even delivered the order, carrying the message in his own hand, but unable to read it. He was likely illiterate.

And so it was.

There's no getting around the fact that this story is all sorts of wrong, that David acted in this event in all sorts of ways wrong. David is one of the greatest heroes in the life of Israel and

Judah. He is to this day lionized as the ideal king. And yet, this event can only be regarded as shameful. In fact, it doesn't even show up in the book 2nd Chronicles, a revisionist look at the historical events recounted first in the books of Samuel. The writer of 1st and 2nd Chronicles had a difficult time with difficult times. He preferred less ambiguity, more hero-worship. For this, the author had to leave this event out entirely. There's no spinning this one. There's no getting around the fact that David behaved here in all sorts of ways wrong.

But he did behave as a king could, indeed in most cases perhaps would, when having risen to such power as to be beyond reproach. Woe unto us when we have no one who tell us, "No." Woe unto the world when there's no one who can tell that strong man to *stop*.

Did you notice in the gospel reading what it was that had Jesus seeking retreat, withdrawing to a mountain by himself? It was this: "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." He had just fed 5,000 people of but five loaves of bread and two fish, and he would, a few hours hence, perform so great a spectacle, walking on water—though he did so in the dark as to make it hard to see. These are reminiscent of the temptations in the wilderness, my realizing of which had me then realize there's no temptation story in the Gospel of John, which then had me wonder whether this was the temptation story in the Gospel of John. This: loyal followers who move to force Jesus to become a king.

...which makes for a crucial difference. Between these two accounts, the synoptics and John, there's an important difference. In the synoptic gospels, the source of temptation up to the task of trying to get Christ to be not-Christ, to be a sort of anti-Christ, was the devil, Satan, some dynamic spirit that works in opposition to the Holy Spirit. In John, the source of temptation to make of Christ an anti-Christ was the people, plain old people, the faithful, the loyal followers. The source of temptation wasn't other-worldly, was altogether too worldly.

John's gospel doesn't have a temptation story, except that it does—and the problem here isn't the devil, the problem is people and the political power they generate when gathered in one body to figure out their way in the world, *our* way in the world.

I've always heard it said that the gospel is political. I've always heard this, but lately I'm hearing it anew. It's not a matter of partisan politics. It's not a matter of which side of the political aisle we vote to staff up. It's about something more fundamental, about the problem of power, the problem of the generation of power that takes place whenever a people join together, the problem

that such power can be generated so potently in rivalry but can be generated much less woefully in love.

Which will it be, rivalry or love?

I know you know which is the right way. I know you know what you're supposed to say. You're in church, so you know the right answer is Jesus, is always Jesus. We all know: it's love, it's sacrificial love.

The thing is, that's so *hard* for the likes of us. To make that choice, actually, *actually*: it's so hard for the likes of us. I mean, consider, please, the throne from which Christ rules according to John's gospel. Consider that John understands Christ glorified when he's raised on the cross. The throne from which Christ reigns is the cross.

Now consider this: David's couch.

Which will it be?

This is the choice ever before us. Whenever we act in the world, this is the choice ever before us, and there's every reason in the world to choose the couch. Blessed be the times when we choose the cross.

Thanks be to God.