

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
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***Of Working in Mysterious Ways***

*Matthew 1.1-6, 17; 2 Samuel 11.1-4; 12.24; 1 Kings 1.11-13; 15-21; 28-30*

Russ Dean, July 20, 2008

I once heard a pastor say that as a child he loved to go to church. I suppose Many children love to go to church – but it was the reason for his love that caught my ear. As the son of a minister his was a conservative household in which any books or magazines or movies that dealt with the salacious details of life, or with violence and immoral behavior were strictly prohibited. The reason he loved worship and Sunday school, though, was not so he could soak in even more of the puritan virtues of his home (quite the contrary!), but because in the reading of the Bible – only in the reading of sacred scripture – was his mind ever titillated by images of sex and violence and the immoral and corrupting behaviors that, despite their destructive effects in real life, do make for enjoyable entertainment! (He went to church to hear about sex and violence!) Now, given the overly graphic nature of our culture I doubt any of you came this morning specifically hoping to exercise your glands through a lurid tale of sacred story. But if you did, like that young preacher’s kid years ago, you will not have been disappointed. For Bathsheba’s story has it all.

It is an amazing story – let me say it once again – amazing just to have made it into our sacred literature.<sup>1</sup> One might think the writers of Israel’s narrative would have a sense of propriety, or even a sense of shame, and want to “white out” some of the lurid details of this story, but it was not to be. There is hardly any way to overestimate the importance of King David

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<sup>1</sup> On numerous occasions recently I have commented at the rare nature of our scripture, a text that dares to be honest in presenting its characters as they are, rather than “prettying” them up, and which presents a variety of images of God, and understandings of God by the people. Too often, I have said, we have tried to “harmonize” this scripture, to make it present a monolithic message. I think the text stands much more powerfully when we can see its very “human” character, so that we can see ourselves in it.

and the Davidic Monarchy in the history of ancient Israel. He is central in Israel's life, past, present, and future. Yet, rather than trying to gloss over David's imperfections, to clean up his history a bit, the writers of our scripture have chosen to leave him as he is, indiscretions and all – and then they still have audacity to call him a “*man after God's own heart*”(Acts 13.22).

There is a deep truth that we need to learn here.

We live in a time in which many people have turned faith into little more than an enterprise of shallow moralism. For many people, being Christian means not “drinking and smoking and dancing” (and not going with girls that do!)... For them, Christian faith is virtually indistinguishable from a list of do's and don'ts, whereby one can evaluate how Christian someone is, just by tallying up the list. That's what I mean by “shallow moralism.” Don't misunderstand – what we do is undeniably important, how we conduct ourselves a reflection of the heart within. Faith leads us to lives of moral significance. But we cannot simply equate faith with a measure of one's successes and failures as evaluated by a list of sins that is often culturally conditioned<sup>2</sup> – for the same faith that can enumerate within this story the sins of adultery and murder and bearing false witness (just to name a few), also knows the humility and forgiveness and forbearance and patience to see this story within a wider framework... to see within the lives of corruptible individuals the strange extravagance of God's providence.

I hope it has occurred to you that it is more than a little ironic that the introduction to this sermon has begun with David. Unfortunately, this is what usually happens to the “*daughter of Eliam,*” the “*wife of Uriah*” (as she is often known in scripture). Though Matthew's gospel,

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<sup>2</sup> No doubt many would disagree with much suggestion that some sins are “culturally conditioned,” yet I believe this is undeniably true. From my simple example, it is clear enough to me that the “sin” of drinking is clearly a cultural issue. Years ago a pastor friend taught me that “drinking has almost nothing to do with religion and almost everything to do with culture.” He is right. And, try preaching against the sin of tobacco usage in the tobacco growing regions of North Carolina! Many of our ideas of what is right and wrong are influenced by our culture.

powerfully yet strangely includes her in its genealogy of Jesus, the writer does not have the decency to call her name: she is Bathsheba, the female ancestor 29 generations removed from the Christ. As we look at her story, we learn even more about that strange Providence: Of (God's) Working – in Mysterious Ways.

Bathsheba was a beautiful woman. This is important to note only because it is all that was initially important to David. He did not care about her heart. Her soul. Her mind... just her body. And in this regard she is only one in an unforgivable and innumerable list of women throughout our sad history who has been used and abused, judged only as an object of sexual desire, taken advantage of to be carelessly discarded by a man wielding power. We have made some progress, but we have hardly removed misogyny from our vocabulary. (If the word is not in your vocabulary, misogyny is the hatred of women!)

The sky-rocketing growth of pornography and an industry of child pornography due to the ease of internet access is a disturbing look into the heart of our culture. I hope that you understand that pornography (most of which is related to women) is not about freedom of expression or celebrating the female form. Pornography is a highly successful enterprise of despising women as objects of desire. The persistence of the sexual trafficking and sexual enslavement of women around the globe is equally disturbing. As are the weekly reports in this country of domestic violence, which often ends in death. And the not-infrequent occurrence in some countries of female infanticide is an unbearable atrocity – that is, the murder of baby girls by their own parents, because girls are of so much less value in their society than are boys. The short, the abuse of women in overt and covert ways is still a sad reality, from the ghettos of Calcutta, India to the high class neighborhoods and upscale offices of Charlotte, NC.

So, I am ashamed to admit that it took me some time to think of this story without the image of Bathsheba as a kind of seductive temptress coming to mind. (Why was she bathing out there so the king could see her, anyway?) That image is both cause and effect of the sexism that is still alive and so destructive among us. Without knowing it, for years I subconsciously fell into the insidious trap of blaming the victim for David's sin. She was a woman. And she was taken advantage of. Period.<sup>3</sup> But because of her tenacity, and perhaps because of the work of God, this is not the end of her story.

As we continue, let me fill in a bit of the narrative I omitted from the scripture. After Bathsheba informs him she is pregnant, the irreproachable David, like too many public figures, refuses to face his sin and thereby compounds it. He calls home Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, who has been on the battle field. (Incidentally, why is it that David is not there? As the writer notes, this is what kings do in the spring time, yet we find our tragic hero at home, as our story begins, lounging on his roof while his troops do his battle. This is the writer's not-so-subtle introductory clue into the character of his main character.) David calls for Uriah, sends him home to Bathsheba, and orders him: "*wash your feet*" (2 Samuel 11.8). As you may guess, he didn't mean that, literally, and I probably don't need to tell you what David had in mind. In our Hebrew text "feet" are sometimes a euphemism for the genitals, so the writer is discretely telling us that David intended a sexual tryst between the beautiful Bathsheba and her field-weary husband, in order to give David cover for his first indiscretion.<sup>4</sup> The text makes it **boldly** clear,

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<sup>3</sup> This comment prompted several people, following worship, to agree with me – they, too, had thought of Bathsheba as the seducer of David. One woman commented that she didn't think she had ever heard anyone say this, explicitly, which seems to make the image even more troubling – something in the nature of "the way things are" had conspired to teach here, implicitly, that Bathsheba was at fault!

<sup>4</sup> I am told the same is true of the calling of Isaiah, who saw six-winged seraphim flying about him – two of which were used to fly, two to cover their faces, and two to cover their "feet." See Isaiah 6.

however, that Uriah the Hittite (that is, a foreigner<sup>5</sup>) has more integrity, faithfulness, and commitment to purpose than the great king himself, for Uriah steadfastly refuses to engage in his own pleasure while his comrades are at war. “*As surely as you live,*” he tells David, “*I will not do such a thing!*” (2 Samuel 11.11)

You know the rest of this episode. David sends Uriah back to the battle field and sends word to the field commander to put him on the front lines and then to pull his troops back so Uriah will be killed. In the next scene the prophet, Nathan, arrives to pronounce David’s sin and to announce that because of his infidelity, the child Bathsheba is carrying will not live. Indeed, the child does die, and it is a second child of this union who eventually becomes the wise Solomon, and the successor to his father’s throne.

Unfortunately, this is all that is known of Bathsheba’s story by most people. She is the beautiful, often nameless woman, who bears to the King the heir to his throne. But as with all of these intriguing Bible stories, there is much more, for without a mother’s protective love, and scheming courage, Solomon would likely have died at the hand of his elder half-brother, Adonijah, who was the heir apparent to the throne.

And what was God’s role in this sordid tale?

No where in scripture are we told that David has promised to Solomon the throne, and as important as the Davidic monarchy is to the running narrative of Hebrew scripture, this is a detail that would not likely have been omitted. We do not hear of this until the prophet Nathan teases

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of those features that surprise me about our text – here, a Jewish text which strongly indicates that the foreign, undoubtedly pagan, Uriah, has more integrity than David, one of the greatest heroes of Jewish lore. We saw this in the story of Balaam (Numbers 22), we see it in the story of Jonah (where the sailors seem more committed to following Yahweh than “the Dove,” (the meaning of Jonah’s name, probably indicating that this literary character stands for all of Israel), and in the story of the Syrophonecian Woman (Mark 7) and the healing of the Centurion’s servant (where Jesus indicates that no one in all of Israel has the faith of this man, Luke 7) – just to mention a few. The bold implication is that simply belonging to the “in” group, whether Judaism, in the Old Testament stories, or Christianity, in the New Testament stories, is no guarantee of actually being “in.” Jesus was undoubtedly more critical of those who were religious than he was of anyone else.

the idea into Bathsheba's mind, perhaps fabricating it for some reason of personal benefit. We cannot know why he suggested it. And we don't have time to work out all of the political implications of this story, the faction of Adonijah and the scheming of the prophet, but these add to the intrigue of the tale.

When Nathan approaches Bathsheba, he suggests that she plant this idea, in the form of a question, "Did you not promise the throne to my son?" One can also hardly miss the appearance of impropriety in the work of Nathan and Bathsheba, as they conspire together to deceive the old, perhaps senile, dying David. Though the Old Testament once referred to David as the king who "knew everything,"<sup>6</sup> the writer plays against this idea as he shows us a David now lying in his bed with a beautiful young wife whom he has not "known." She is only lying in his bosom to keep him warm. David does not know that his eldest surviving son, Adonijah, has proclaimed himself king, nor does he know Adonijah has instigated a celebration to claim the throne. And he does not know of his supposed promise to Solomon.

When Bathsheba boldly approaches the king in his quarters, a bold act, itself improper by custom, she takes Nathan's advice, but adds a twist of her own. She doesn't plant Nathan's question in the dying king's mind ("Did you not..."), but proposes the supposed promise as a prior fact: "You promised the throne to Solomon, my son..." And then she employs a little stereotypical female helplessness (I can almost see her batting her long eyelashes and cocking out that hip) when she informs him that if Adonijah becomes king... she and Solomon will be in mortal danger. (What real man can resist rescuing the fair maiden?)

So it is that Solomon becomes king. The illegitimate offspring of an adulterous liaison. The orphan of a murdered father. The adopted child of a treacherous, yet able, politician. The

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 14.20 says David had wisdom, and the ability "to know all things that are on earth."

spiritual son of a scheming prophet. The beloved child of an always-protective mother. The ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Old Testament scholar Choon-Leong Seow says we may choose to read this story in one of three ways. Perhaps it is a document of history. The way it literally happened. But maybe it is a political treatise, written for the purpose of propaganda (justifying the legitimacy of Solomon's reign). Or, he suggests, it may originally have been intended just for entertainment. And it is an entertaining tale. But Seow makes it clear that whatever intentions may be embedded in this ancient tale, there is also a deeper purpose at work. This is made clear for the Christian reader in the way Matthew chooses to open his gospel. If we read carefully we will note, as with all stories in scripture, that the primary purpose is theological. What is God doing in this story? You see, Matthew leaves out three of Jesus' ancestors, who are named in an older genealogy in the Old Testament, in order to add symmetry to his family tree.<sup>7</sup> Fourteen generations from Jesus to Babylon, fourteen generations to David, fourteen generations to Abraham. Ah, there must be something divine going on in such a pattern. Don't you think?

You see, it is the undeniable conviction of the writers of scripture who see the will of God being played out even in the foibles and failures of all-too-human characters, even in the deception of a "man of the cloth," even in the protective love of an abused mother. And you and I can see this even in the manipulative choices made by the writers of scripture, whose purpose is not to deceive or create a so-called divine plan, but to use the creative power of literature to convey not history, but God's history.<sup>8</sup> Seow says it this way:

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<sup>7</sup> See the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3.

<sup>8</sup> Please understand that it is never my intent to try to belittle the text. It is just interesting to me that such blatant "errors" can be found. (And this, given the recent 30-plus year battle in Baptist life over the so-called "inerrancy of scripture"!)

My point is only to emphasize what seems manifestly obvious: the writers' purpose is never simply the

“God’s purpose is constantly worked out as history moves along and human beings scheme. But human plots cannot derail God’s plan... For the Christian believer, the scandals that attend Solomon’s succession to the throne of David are part of the gospel story – the good news that God comes to us through the very arena of human history, through ordinary human beings – sinners all... Solomon’s succession is just part of the mysterious working out of God’s eternal promise...”<sup>9</sup>

We have been working some of this out in our summer Sunday school lessons, so let us be careful not to equate this view with the idea that in some way God “caused” these things to happen, that God “willed” or “ordained” the implicit rape of Bathsheba or the misplaced deception of an old prophet, in order to work out the birth of Jesus miraculously in the end. The point is that Jesus is one of us. He shares our genealogy. He is a part of our history. And in his line were a few unsuspected, unsuspecting characters at work, even a woman named Bathsheba whose tragic story God used for a greater good.

Yes, the Lord works in mysterious ways.

May it always be so!

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facts, for the “facts” are often manipulated, as in this obvious case, to highlight the more important theological emphasis. In this case the symmetry of three sequences of 14-generations, each, seems to more strongly enforce the notion that something divine is “going on” in the ancestry of Jesus. (In ancient numeric symbolism both the number three and seven signified completion or wholeness, thus the pattern of three sequences of two sevens, each.)

<sup>9</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume III, 1 Kings, p.24.