

The Giant Who Defeated David

May 14, 2017

II Samuel 11:1-15, 26-27; I Peter 1:13-16

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/sermon05-14_2017-05-14_11-31-22_t001_in1.mp3

Lamia Airlines flight 933 crashed in Columbia in December 2016, and 71 people died. In June, 2009, Air France lost flight 447 and all 227 souls on board. A further 137 lives were lost when Germanwings flight 9525 plunged into the French Alps. In these and dozens of other airline disasters, what is the first thing that the authorities do? They look for the “black box”, right? Those things have been required in commercial aircraft for 50 years. They tell a story.

Here’s a trivia question for you: what color is the “black box” on an aircraft? It’s orange. And, appropriately, nobody in the transportation safety field calls it a “black box”; it’s known as the Flight Recorder. Generally, these devices consist of two units: the Flight Data Recorder and the Cockpit Voice Recorder.



Why do the authorities spend so much time and energy looking for these things after a disaster? Well, you might say that they tell us what went wrong – and if you said that, you’d be incorrect. But more about that in a moment. They do, in fact, often reveal clues about what went wrong in that disaster, but I don’t think that’s the ultimate reason that these things are sought.



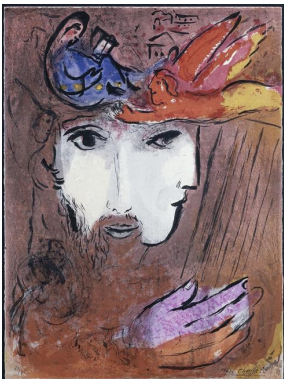
¹Since September, our congregation has been watching the story of David’s call and rise to be the ruler of Israel. We saw him as a young boy when he was plucked from the fields by Samuel and anointed in front of his

¹ *David* (Lorenzo Monaco, c. 1408)

older brothers. We were there as he rose to prominence as the one who slew the Philistine giant, and watched as he was unjustly accused and hunted down by King Saul. We have seen him protect those who were vulnerable and seek to unify Israel, which culminated on the day that he was called the *nagid* – the “prince” – of God. We’ve noted that this has not been what you might call a “meteoric” rise, but slowly and steadily, David has been growing in wisdom, power, and faith. He has behaved as, and has been called, “a man after God’s own heart.”

Until today.

The reading this morning from II Samuel 11 describes a crash and burn which is no less dramatic than the crash of USAirways flight 427 here in Pittsburgh almost 25 years ago.



²You’ve heard the story of how this gifted and faithful man, in relatively short order, manages to neglect his duty to his office, abuse a vulnerable young woman, order the murder of her husband and several other deaths which could be chalked up as “collateral damage”, and finally lie to both the nation and to YHWH about what he had done. The closing verse of this chapter is indeed an understatement:

“But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.”

Just as the flight recorders on airliners contain a lot of information that can clue investigators into seeing what went wrong, this chapter has a good deal of data that assist us in our investigation of how things went so badly so quickly.

The narrative begins matter-of-factly by asserting that in the spring – that is, during the wheat and barley harvest when armies were on the move... David was not. For all of his life, David had been on the front lines. When it was time to fight Goliath, he went

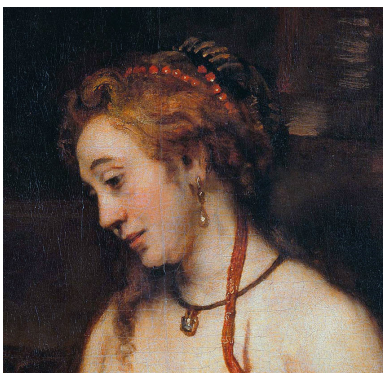
² *David And Bathsheba* (Marc Chagall, 1956).

when nobody else was willing to go. On other occasions, he led with bravery and distinction. But here, he is willing to *send* other people into harm's way, but not to *lead* them there. Instead, he orders his nephew, Joab, to take charge while he remains behind in Jerusalem.

Not only is David unwilling to go to battle on behalf of the nation, he is also apparently disinterested in the affairs of state. The text tells us that *one evening*, David got out of bed and took a walk upstairs to the balcony. The leader of God's people is evidently sleeping all day and prowling around, bored and distracted, at night.

In his choice of titles, the narrator gives us further clues as to what was happening with David. At his installation as king, and again when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, David was referred to as the *nagid* of Israel. The typical word for "king" in Hebrew is *melek*, but David is called *nagid*, or "prince". This is an affirmation of the fact that when he was on his game, David functioned as the temporal agent of the real authority – God. As *nagid*, David was accountable to an even higher authority. Yet here in verses 2, 8, and 9, we see David called *melek*.

It's easy to see why that word is used, too. Look at the verbs in verse 2. Unfortunately, not all of them translate freely from the Hebrew, but in fairly short order, David sent, took, used, and sent a woman away. That's what *meleks* do. That's what old Samuel tried to tell Israel all the way back in I Samuel 8 – that kings will take and use and discard. Clearly, that's what David is attempting to do here.



³Let's take the spotlight off David for just a moment and look at the poor woman who is, I suspect, unwillingly involved in this drama. We

David's Letter (detail) (Rembrandt, 1654)

know (although not from David) that her name is Bathsheba. I suspect that she is quite young – perhaps a teenager, because she is old enough to be married but young enough not to have started a family yet. We know that she is religiously observant, and faithful to the laws of God. Because she is forced to bathe in the open air, I think that we'd be justified in thinking her to be a person who lived in poverty – after all, privacy has a price tag that the poorest cannot afford. And she is vulnerable. In spite of being told her name, David does not bother to use it. Throughout the narrative, she is “the woman” or “the wife of Uriah.” She is not granted her own personhood, but rather exists only to be defined by others.

Just last week, in II Samuel 9, we saw how David used Mephibosheth's name to liberate Mephibosheth from anonymity; David sought an intimacy with the son of his friend that allowed him to build a relationship that was characterized by *chesed* – the loving, loyal, truthful presence and practice of friendship that led to a blessing that was passed down through the generations.

Today, David is only interested in satisfying his own pleasure, slaking his own lust, and solidifying his own power – a series of behaviors that leads to death and destruction that has generationally similar effects.

When he has used Bathsheba in the way that suited him and then she was found to be inconveniently pregnant, David fell to a new low as he tried to pin the conception on her husband. All weekend, David tries to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, but the soldier's thoughts are only with his comrades and with the nation – he doesn't have time for the distraction of family leave – he wants to get back to the front. And so you heard how in verse 15 David arranged with his nephew to set Uriah at the worst point of the fighting so that the Ammonites would kill him.

If you were here a couple of months ago, you'll recall that

this is the exact same strategy used by King Saul to get rid of David – in I Samuel 18, he asks David to attempt the impossible so that the Philistines will wind up killing David and Saul will not be to blame.

In short, David has become the *melek* that he replaced; he has become the very thing that he abhors; the very one about whom God's prophet Samuel warned the people and that God himself disdains. It is a horrible sequence of events: evil took root in David's heart, and that evil brought him to a place where he willingly sought to inflict pain and grief and misery on others; and that in turn led to a number of tragedies in the lives of Bathsheba, Uriah, the royal family, the nation, and of course David himself. It is, as I have stated, a crash and burn.

At the outset of this message, I asked why we sought to be attentive to the information contained in the Flight Data and Cockpit Voice Recorders. When someone suggested that we did that so we would know what happened, or what went wrong, I said that I thought that was only partially correct.

The real reason we want to pay attention to that kind of data is so that we can avoid making similar mistakes in the future. We need to know what happened, of course; but more than that, we need to learn from it. We need to come up with some strategies or safeguards that prevent us from ever doing this again.

If I asked you to name the giant that David defeated as a young boy, you'd say, I hope, "Goliath". And you'd be right. But if I asked you to name the giant that defeated David in his middle age, I'm afraid you'd say "lust" or "desire". And I don't think that's correct. Oh, that may be what knocked him down. But the defeat started earlier with the ways that David nurtured a giant named complacency. Complacency was the one who convinced David to leave the doors of his heart and spirit unlocked, and lust was the one who happened to come in and ransack the place.

It's obvious that David, at this point in his life, has grown smug and self-satisfied. He's addicted to his own power and the lifestyle he enjoys – one that is drenched with luxury and ease. Amidst all of that, he has lost touch with his source of real power, purpose, and strength. He has become completely unhinged.

And it might be easy for us to say, "Well, of course. I mean, it's a mid-life crisis for a wealthy man. He got drunk with his incredible wealth and power and this is what resulted."

Except we can't really say that. Let me be clear: everyone in this room is wealthier and, in some way, more powerful than King David could ever dream of being.

The average poor American – someone who makes, say, \$25,000 a year, lives in a home that is climate controlled and equipped with a television and a telephone. He or she eats far more calories than necessary and is able to take those calories from abundant and varied food sources.

Although King David lived in a palace, he didn't have access to running water; and with the threat of smallpox and tuberculosis and who knows what else, the average life expectancy for a man was about 45 years. He would have eaten well in comparison to his countrymen, but still would have been limited to seasonably available food from relatively local sources.

With your bike, your car, and these roads – to say nothing of a plane ticket – you can travel further in one day than David ever imagined possible. With your computer or television or smartphone, you have access to more enticing images of naked bodies than any of the ancients would have thought possible.

My point is simply that David did not have a rich person's problem. He had a human problem.

David, the "man after God's own heart", chose to leave that heart unguarded, and that decision brought calamity to him and to

all who surrounded him.

What makes you any different from King David?

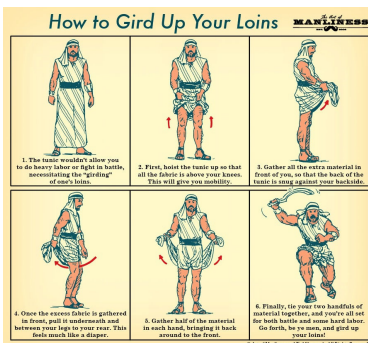
What makes your discipleship any more reliable than his?
What makes your integrity any greater? Your devotion any more passionate?

Nothing.

You and I are every bit as human as was he. And we are therefore called to be attentive to what we can salvage from his story in an effort to learn from it so that we might not fall victim to the same fate.

There is wisdom for us, church, in the letter that Peter sent to his followers. Peter – another fella who knew something about acting rashly and impulsively – writes to a group of believers scattered through Asia Minor. These are people who know all of the Jesus stories; they’ve said all of the right things and believe all of the important stuff. The translation you heard this morning reads fairly well in English. In it, Peter says, “Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.” But the literal translation is even juicier: he uses the expression “gird up the loins of your mind.”

I bet you didn’t know your mind had loins, and if so, exactly how you would gird them. Here’s the meaning of that phrase: it has to do with ancient wardrobe practices and athletic prowess.



In the ancient near east, both men and women would have worn something loose and flowing – much like this alb I have on now. It works well in the heat, provides protection from the sun, and so on. But imagine how silly I’d look – and how dangerous it would be – trying to sprint up Stratmore Street

dressed like this. So when it was time for some hard work or quick action, the wearer would have to get a lot of this extra fabric out of the way by hiking it up around the midsection and tying it off. If you knew that quick action or hard work was on the horizon, you'd "gird" yourself – be prepared – so that the wardrobe would not prevent you from doing what was necessary. In the same way, Peter says, we do that spiritually. We are alert. We are ready.

We do this by training ourselves to resist complacency. One of the most important conversations I've ever had with anyone occurred some years ago as I was talking with a trusted spiritual advisor. I must have said something that smacked of "Ah, I got this. No big deal," because she grabbed me by the lapel and said, "David Carver, do not ever forget that you are seducible. I don't know by what – it may be sex, it may be money, it may be popularity – but know this: you are seducible. Be on your guard."

The memory of that conversation – probably fifteen years ago, now – is vivid for me as I seek to be moving forward in faith. The primary means of avoiding complacency is seeking to continue to grow in our faith. We cannot ever get to a place where we simply decide that we've "nailed it." There is always room to grow, always something to learn, always a path that leads deeper. David got lazy, or weary, and he stopped looking for opportunities to grow stronger in his faith. That had disastrous consequences for him and for his community.

You and I are called to pursue holiness – to remember that God has something for us, and we are here to figure out how we can grow in our ability to steward that which God has given us.

Every plane you've ever been on carries a flight recorder – a "black box". But I'd guess that none of the flights you've been on has needed to refer to the data from that recorder. Why? Because you haven't crashed. Why haven't you crashed?

In all probability, you haven't crashed because the people flying the plane have completed the pre-flight checklist. They have gone over the list of tasks that are necessary for safe operation of the plane. I'm sure that it's tempting for seasoned pilots in familiar aircraft to think that these are unnecessary; I hope, however, that they take it seriously every time. Just as we count on the folks from Southwest or American Airlines to check and double check the flaps, seals, and stops, so you and I do well to make sure that we are connected well to each other and to God every day; to be alert to and diligent about the small things in our lives that affect our integrity – so that when it comes to the big questions, we're less likely to fail. Beloved, let us commit to staying focused on our faith, to being honest with each other, to practicing the disciplines of prayer and study and generosity and humility – so that when we find ourselves in the midst of a storm, we might be ready to move through it without crashing and burning. Thanks be to God! Amen.