

"Nothing New Under the Sun."

Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Samuel 11-12:15.

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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For the past several weeks we've had a chance to look at some of the stories about King David. First was the story of how God sent the prophet Samuel to pick young David out of the line-up of all his brothers because God had chosen him to lead the people of Israel. Next came the famous fight with Goliath.

Later, David gets really carried away for joy as he dances before the Ark of the Covenant. Last week he thought he was going to build a Temple to house the Ark, only to find out that God was going to build him a house and a legacy instead.

Story by story we have seen God at work in shepherding David, watching over him, blessing him. He is the golden, fair-haired boy of the Old Testament, the one who can do no wrong. Or can he?

Today's story marks a turning point in the whole record of David's life. What happens here shapes everything else. It will have far-reaching consequences for him and for the nation.

It starts off innocently enough, almost matter-of-fact. "It was: springtime for David and Israel." It was the time when kings go to war. That's what kings do. Only, this time, David didn't.

Other years David would have been in the thick of the battle and shoulder-to-shoulder with his troops. This year he decided to stay in Jerusalem and let others fight his battles.

We're familiar with statements like: "Idle hands are the Devil's playground" and "power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

It would appear that David, this man of action, was bored. But as we heard in the story, the boredom soon gave way to adultery and palace intrigue and a cover-up.

Soon, any thoughts we had of how special David was are dashed. The Bible lets us in on the shady, bedroom and backroom dealings of a man who just isn't as great as we thought, or hoped, he was.

It's just "politics as usual" - an indiscretion, an attempted cover-up, a murder - the same kind of cold, calculating abuse of power that is nothing new to behold.

A man in power sees what he wants and takes it. Afterwards he has to try and cover up what has happened. When that fails he gets in even deeper by orchestrating a murder.

David didn't jet to Argentina. He didn't have his palace lackeys concoct a story that he was out hiking on the Appalachian Trail.

He also didn't have a fling with a palace intern. He didn't try to parse the meaning of "is" or steadfastly insist that he "did not have sex with Bathsheba".

But that hardly matters.

This story is all about abusing power and thumbing one's nose at God's commandments and the sacred trust that comes with being in a position of great responsibility and authority.

It is an old, old story. What makes it new is the way that the prophet Nathan decides to "catch the conscience of the king". He didn't use a play like Hamlet did, but he did use a story to prick David's conscience and allow for the possibility that God would have a part to play in the proceedings.

It was a risky move on Nathan's part. The story he tells David lets us know that Nathan knew precisely what David had done. But what was there to keep David from "offing" Nathan and continuing the cover-up?

We might be a little worried for Nathan's sake. As Walter Brueggeman points out: a lesser man, a lesser king might have simply done away with the prophet to keep the cover up going.

It's like the courtroom scene from "A Few Good Men" where the defense lawyer Tom Cruise is able to get the commandant Jack Nicholson to admit to what had happened and for the truth to surface out of the murky waters of cover-up and intrigue.

When the prophet's story offends David's sense of justice the trap is sprung: "Thou art the man!" cries Nathan and then, in short order, he reminds David of all that God had done for him and how David's actions have run roughshod over righteousness and will result in trouble.

Uriah is dead. The child that Bathsheba is carrying will die. The sword will plague his family and the nation. His image will forever be tarnished by this tawdry tale.

So, what will happen next? David, this man of decisive action is equally decisive in his admission of guilt. "I have sinned against the Lord."

The one thing that David does in this entire, sad story that has any redeeming quality to it is this: he admits his sin.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to step away from a path that leads toward destruction and to turn around (which is what "repent" means) and become obedient rather than pridefully stubborn and try to maintain our own righteousness when that quality has long since left the building.

None of us are immune from the desire to want what we want when we want it. All of us need to have people in our lives like Nathan who can speak the truth to us in a way that gets under our radar and around our defenses and enables us to see things for how they really are.

David has behaved as if he didn't know any better, as if he didn't know God's commandments or God's providence. He has willfully chosen amnesia. But, thanks to Nathan, the amnesia clears away and David re-establishes himself as a child of the covenant through his confession.

Still, his squeaky-clean image is gone. And in its place is the realization that no one is above God's law. No one can be a fully autonomous being. Not even the king. Not even one such as King David. Not even you or I.

And so this story circles around to you and to me. How have we engaged in a "cover-up"? How have we tried to practice amnesia and do whatever seems right to us, regardless of who gets hurt or how it offends God's holy law? How can we find a way to confess our faults and trust in the gracious mercy of God?

That's our homework and our heartwork. Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be judged." We have more than enough to do by taking that fearless and searching inventory of our own lives, holding up the mirror to our own actions, trying to get right with God and with our neighbor.

It's tough work. Even the most high and mighty ones will get brought low. Only God's mercy and grace can sustain us. Only God can restore to us the joy of our salvation, as the psalmist pleads.

And the good news in all this bad news is that God can and will and has restored our joy through the gift of grace and salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a gift that is available to all who truly repent and reject the idea that they are an island unto themselves and don't need to follow God's laws or behave in ways that build up the fabric of humanity instead of tearing it to shreds.

Just as tales of corruption and abuse of power are nothing new, tales of honesty and integrity and self-sacrifice are just as ancient and just as powerful and just as able to shape us and to direct our steps.

Which story will shape us? The world's story or God's story?