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# “Worse Than I Thought...”

*2 SAMUEL 11:1-15*

Today's story reminds me of those 18th century portraits that you see in museums. You know, those portraits where the subjects always seem to be in deep reflection, practically approaching sainthood. Beards and hairdos are neat and well-groomed and they're dressed magnificently. A few have their hands stuffed inside their coats like Napoleon. These portraits may suggest they're in their prime, but my guess is that they're already retired.

Another thing: where are the warts and cauliflower noses? The artist has smoothed out wrinkles, straightened teeth, and replaced crossed-eyes with piercing vision. In the portrait, George Washington's teeth may look like porcelain, but in real life they're just stained and wooden. People have always wanted to be remembered in the best possible light.

I think most of us are like that. If MGM made a movie of your life, to sell the movie they'd include your most embarrassing and humiliating sins in graphic detail! So next month you read in the Newsletter there's a screening of your steamy life story showing down at the Crystal!

I'm not sure who would pay to see it, but I know one person whose would be conspicuous -- you! We don't want to parade our dirty laundry around. We want our best portrait in the public eye.

Did you know that there are two very different portraits of David's life in the Bible? One is in 1st Chronicles. In that portrait, the story of David is recorded much like a 18th century portrait -- as a military hero, a Napoleonic conqueror, a spiritual national icon. No warts!

But the other portrait of David is in 2nd Samuel. This version is the stuff that movies are made of! Here is a picture of David without his halo -- a man caught in his most aberrant and humiliating moments. It's in 2 Samuel that we see David at his worst -- at his most human. This is the MGM version of the man.

It's spring. And you know what that means! It's the season for armies to go out and kill each other. So Israel's army is out in the thick of battle. Except for David. He should be. He is their military leader. Just his presence would encourage bravery among the troops. But David's not with the troops. He's back in Jerusalem, sleeping in -- withdrawing from the action.

One writer suggests that his staying home is symptomatic of a leanness of soul. He seems to be pulling back from the avid prayer and audacious faith that has marked his life.

It's sunset, and David has just gotten up. He's walking on the veranda and sees a beautiful woman taking a bath on the roof across the valley. With each passing moment David hungers after this vision. So he sends his valet to find out more about her. And here's what the valet says:

Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?

That is one smart valet! Normally, an Israelite would simply give the genealogy: "This is so and so, the daughter of so and so and the granddaughter of so and so." But did you catch what this valet is telling David? "This is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, and wife of Uriah the Hittite." As plain as he can, without losing his head, the valet is saying, "Dude, she's married!"

No matter. It's good to be the king, and she's beautiful, so he sends for her and takes her in his bed. Then he discards her and sends her home.

And where is Bathsheba's husband during this affair, you might ask? Uriah is off fighting in the army. Bathsheba discovers that she's pregnant and tells David; so David, the master problem-solver, sends for Uriah and gives him a month's leave, certain that, together, Uriah and Bathsheba will solve this little baby problem – wink, wink, nudge, nudge ;-)

But Uriah will not enjoy pleasure while his men are out on the battlefield risking their lives. (I could do a whole 'nother sermon on Uriah!). So he sleeps in the servant's quarters behind David's palace. Then David gets Uriah drunk on palace wine, but still Uriah will not go to Bathsheba.

Now David panics. In a final act of desperation, David sends Bathsheba's husband to the battlefield with a letter for Joab, Uriah's military commander. "Put Uriah in the front, in the thickest part of the battle," orders David. Within the hour, Uriah is no longer a threat. Bathsheba has barely finished mourning her husband's death when David snatches her up to the palace for his wife collection.

We know all about David, right? Greatest king Israel ever had. Unifier of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Sinner. Was imperfect. God uses

flawed people, and all that? But it's worse than I thought. David wasn't just a little bit flawed.

In 1 Samuel, when the Israelites demanded that Samuel appoint a king for them, Samuel warned them about the ways of kings: "He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen..." Now in 2 Samuel 11, the apparatus of kingship is on full display. David even has foreign mercenaries (Uriah is a Hittite).

Further, Israel had been warned that kings also "will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers." David has already taken several wives and concubines; now he takes one more, the *daughter* of Eliam, and the *wife* of Uriah. David has taken a daughter without the cultural norm of consulting the father. She is also a wife which makes it adultery.

Flash forward to 2015. Grace lives in the Lake Victoria basin of Tanzania. At 14 years old, she ran away from home with a man visiting her village because her parents could no longer pay her school fees. Grace and her husband had two children together.

Although she married young, she valued her marriage. But once her husband got money, he took another wife without her consent. Her husband and his second wife were married in a Christian church. Even though polygamous marriage is illegal for Christians in Tanzania, Grace said churches rarely check to see if the partners are already married.

She didn't know what to do. She tried to live in this new polygamous relationship, but it became too much. After her husband took a third wife, she ran away to Nairobi, where she found a job as a maid. After she left, her children did not do well without her. Her oldest son was especially distraught. She managed to pay his school fees for his first two years of secondary school, but by his third year her situation had changed. She could no longer afford the school fees, and the father refused to help as long as Grace was no longer acting as his wife.

In her job as a maid, Grace was sexually harassed constantly by the owner of the house. She refused to sleep with him for almost a year, but then, he offered to pay her son's school fees in exchange for sex. She still said no, but upon hearing that her son had been crying for two weeks, she finally gave in. She knew her poverty made it impossible to care for all her children, but she said, "Let me fight for just this one."

But the only weapon Grace had to fight with was her body. As a result, she contracted HIV by giving into her boss' demands. This was how she protected her family.

Grace's son has now grown up and graduated from college. He is smart, dedicated and cares deeply for his mother. He also has no idea that his mother contracted HIV while trying to secure his future.

While Grace's story shocks and angers us, as it says in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun." The story of a woman being forced into a situation where she uses her body as a tool for survival is a story as old as time.

This is Bathsheba's story as well. She was bathing on the roof when King David, who should have been in battle, saw her and sent for her. 2Samuel doesn't tell us much about the encounter, only that he sent, she came, and he slept with her. Missing from the biblical record is Bathsheba's voice. The only words we hear from her mouth is her message to David: "I'm pregnant."

What we do know is that during this time period, women had very few choices about their bodies. When a king sends for you, you come. We remember other stories, like the story of Tamar, who was raped by David's favorite son, Amnon, and we remember how David did nothing in response BTW, David's other two wives, Michal and Abigail, are taken out of violence as well.

Though separated by thousands of years, we find a common thread in Grace and Bathsheba's stories. Both women were at the mercy of the men, forced in to situations where their bodies became their only currency for survival.

The women in the study in Tanzania report that that they cannot refuse sex with their husbands: if they refuse, they would be "beaten first and raped later."

I wonder if Bathsheba would have told a similar story about her encounter with David. I wonder if she submitted because she feared for her husband's life. The second part of this passage shows us clearly that David controlled Uriah's fate.

Like the story of David and Bathsheba, death and love are too often linked in the stories of women living with HIV and AIDS in Africa. If we want to see this pandemic end, then women must be given agency -- power and control over their own lives. One way to do this is for churches to advocate for women's rights around the world.

This global pandemic reminds us that it's time for some stories -- like the story of patriarchy -- to come to an end. You hear pastors and church leaders all the time talking about seeing the world through the eyes of God or with the eyes of Christ.

Well? This is what God sees. This is one of the things that humans do to each other that breaks God's heart. But by simply becoming aware of it, we've made a good start. Now what?

Here is an excerpt from the UMC Book of Resolutions:

In response to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, The United Methodist Church is working cooperatively with colleague churches in every region. The global statistics are grim. At the end of 2006, 39 and a half million adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS in the world. The global AIDS pandemic provides a nearly unparalleled opportunity for witness to the gospel through service, advocacy, and other healing ministries.

In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the world, The United Methodist Church commits itself to a holistic approach of awareness, education, prevention, treatment, community organizing, and public advocacy.

If you would like more information – if you would like to see our church be more involved, let me know.