THE KING REPENTS

TEXT: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:15

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on June 19, 2022

Last year, Juneteenth was recognized as a federal holiday for the first time. If you're like me, you didn't learn about Juneteenth growing up. We learned about Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that freed more than 3.5 million enslaved African Americans in the Confederate states on January 1, 1863. But nobody added that the proclamation was not announced or enacted in most places until federal troops showed up to enforce it.

The federal soldiers finally got to their last stop, Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865, a full 2.5 years after Lincoln's proclamation. There, Major General Gordon Granger took command of more than 2,000 federal troops to announce and end to slavery in Texas and the beginning of the enforcement of that law in the state. Maybe you were taught that in school. I was not.

I also was not taught about most of the next hundred years of US history as it related to the struggles and setbacks for racial equality. I was taught about advancements in that area, but not about the violent backlashes to those advances or the systemic and organized reasons that there was not a single Black child in my Rhode Island high school of over 2,000 children.

About now you might be asking what any of that has to do with the lurid and gruesome story of King David and Bathsheba. My answer is that one of the many reasons we have been taking one step forward and six steps back on addressing racism and other forms of systemic oppression is because those of us in the privileged caste, very particularly in the church, have thoroughly lost touch with or found it convenient to ignore what God asks of us when we sin. In many cases we have lost the ability to even recognize sin, seeing our privilege as a sign of our virtue instead of a warning of our blindness.

The story of David and Bathsheba gives us a lens to understand the real cost of recognizing and making restitution for the damage our sin has caused, without resorting to what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." And that can guide us to a point where we can see the work needed for real change and healing going forward.

So, let's go back to roughly the year 1,000 BCE to the palace of King David, Israel's second king in Jerusalem. Israel was at war and the start of chapter 11 sets the scene by pointing out that, as king, David should have been out fighting with his men. His general, Joab, is in the field as are a group called "The Thirty," David's elite fighting force, his most trusted soldiers. One of those 30 men was Uriah, who had been deployed for some time, leaving behind his wife, Bathsheba, in their Jerusalem home.

On this day, David gets up from his palace couch to take a stroll around his roof, one of the highest points in the city. Bathsheba also heads to the roof of the home that she shares with Uriah to take a bath, which is where anyone with the privilege of a rooftop took a bath. In an ancient city in the desert, that's where the cistern was, that's where the water warmed up easily in the heat of the sun, and that's where it was the most private. Unless you lived relatively close to someone who could afford a larger home with a higher roof—like, for instance, the king.

David sees and lusts after Bathsheba. Since he is the king, and kings can have whatever they want, he sends someone to get her. He takes what he wants because he can and then sends her back home. Soon the news comes that she is pregnant, which is a problem since Uriah hasn't been in the city for months, let alone anywhere near his wife. It's a PR problem for David, but it's a life and death problem for Bathsheba, who could be stoned to death for adultery, even though she had no choice. Who's going to believe her over the king? Half the people who read this story blame her, even 3,000 years later, despite the story putting 100% of the blame where it belongs, on King David. If you hear this story and your first instinct is to blame Bathsheba, I can suggest some anti-sexism training for you.

As his first cover-up attempt, David brings Uriah home from battle in the hopes that he'll go spend some quality time with his wife and everyone will assume the child is his. But he doesn't. Uriah spends the night at the palace, refusing to enjoy a privilege the rest of his men don't have. David then tries to override that sense of loyalty by getting Uriah drunk. Nope. Uriah still does not go home.

So how does David reward the honor and loyalty of one of his best, most trusted soldiers? He sends him back to the battle, tells Joab to not only put Uriah on the front lines where the battle will be fiercest, but to have other soldiers pull back and leave Uriah exposed without backup so that he will be killed in battle. Joab follows orders, Uriah is killed, and David then takes Uriah's grieving widow and brings her into his harem, where she has the baby. No remorse, just relief that he has apparently gotten away with the deed, leaving him with a plus-one on the wife side of the ledger.

The last line of chapter 11 claps back, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." The ancient kings of Israel always had at least one prophet assigned to the court. In this case, that prophet was a man named Nathan, who enters the scene in chapter 12 with a very dangerous job: to confront the king about his multiple, egregious sins.

The same privilege that allowed David to take any woman he wanted and to kill off anyone standing in his way, could also land Nathan in a grave next to Uriah if David was so inclined. Calling out the king takes courage; surviving that encounter takes skill. So, Nathan tells a story, hoping that David's experience as a shepherd boy who loved his sheep will allow him to recognize his sin. The story lands as Nathan hoped and, thinking the story is a factual account, David is outraged and orders the execution of the rich man in the story as well as significant restitution for the poor man. Then Nathan drops the hammer. "You are the man!" Nathan then draws out the analogy and pronounces God's judgment on David.

While David has behaved horribly on every front up to this point, what follows is where the tide starts to turn, teaching us our first lesson. Outside intervention is often necessary to help us even recognize our sin. Whether it's a prophet confronting a king, a family staging an intervention about an addiction, or a court requiring an abuser to get counseling; the most entrenched of our sins are often invisible to us. We can't repent of what we can't see; and helping us to see our sin is the role of the prophet, the activist, and, for the most deeply-rooted problems, entire movements like today's #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo.

The brilliance of Nathan's story is that it allowed David to feel in his gut the kind of betrayal and harm he has done to Uriah and Bathsheba. Once Nathan connects the dots from the story of the poor man and his lamb to David's actions, David gets it. He isn't just ashamed of being caught or afraid of God's wrath, he has empathy. He understands not just what he has done, but why it was so horribly wrong. It took an outside intervention to get him there; but he finally saw it and felt it; which is the goal.

Not a single soul is healed or helped by mere words, although that's certainly a start. A successful intervention results not just in words but in evidence that we understand and deeply regret the pain we have caused. Empathy. Repentance begins with pain—being able and willing to feel in ourselves the pain of those we have harmed to such an extent that we become willing to change our behavior and accept the pain of whatever the consequences might be.

This past week, the retired bishop of Ghent, Belgium refused the Pope's promotion to cardinal because of his own insufficient response to cases of clergy sexual abuse. He said he declined the honor in order "to not harm victims again." That's what repentance looks like, born of empathy for others rather than a desire for self-protection or promotion. The courage of survivors coming forward and the movement that grew around them was, at least for him, effective. He came to understand the real and lasting harm his inaction had done. We might wish he had resigned his position entirely, but at least recognizing the harm a promotion would do is a step in the right direction.

We see that also in David. When Nathan's "You're the man" hits home, there is not a bit of defensiveness from David. There's no "I'm sorry, but…"; no begging for forgiveness; no objection to the dire consequences Nathan has just laid out. David says simply and clearly, "I have sinned against the Lord." As a result, David is

spared the death sentence he issued for the rich man in the story; but other dire consequences remain throughout his life.

We have fuller picture of David's repentance in Psalm 51, which was our Call to Worship this morning and which is widely used as a prayer of confession. If you read the small words in italics at the top of Psalm 51, it gives the context for the writing of the Psalm. It says, "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

In Psalm 51 David begs God to clean his heart, and to purge his spirit. David asks for mercy, but he also acknowledges that God's sentence is justified. I take issue with verse 4 where David prays, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." Bathsheba and the spirit of Uriah would like a word here. But otherwise, the Psalm is exactly the kind of prayer we should pray when we have sinned. It makes no excuses, it expresses remorse, it accepts the consequences for the behavior, and it promises change while acknowledging that a changed heart will not happen without God's merciful help.

The United States has never done anything like what David did in response to our much more serious sins, like the genocide of Native Americans and the abduction and enslavement of Africans and their descendants. Not only have we never gotten to Psalm 51, as a nation we have never even gotten to David's initial response to Nathan—the full, non-defensive acceptance across federal and state governments that what we did was deeply and horribly wrong. If we fully absorbed that, there would be no debate at all about reparations. We would honor and enforce our treaties with Native tribes. The Voting Rights Act signed by LBJ would today be strengthened, not gutted.

Instead, we are still blaming the victims, justifying our actions, attributing particular stories to particular bad actors rather than acknowledging the laws and systems that were put in place specifically to prevent restitution and protect those who seek to take away any gains that are made. Worse, the Church has historically and is still at this moment, either aiding and abetting those sins directly or looking the other way, condemning the most blatant sins from a distance while failing to take meaningful action to change the status quo within our own spheres of influence.

Until we, as a country and as a church, are able to face our sin, understand its horrible impact in a way that shows empathy for its victims, and accept both the deserved consequences and the need to compensate those from whom we stole life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; we are destined to live in the hellscape of violence and division we have created for ourselves and for others. We are wrong to ask forgiveness while the harm is not only unacknowledged in any meaningful way, but still active and destroying lives daily.

Too often, our "Forgive me" means "Don't hold me accountable. Don't make me suffer any consequences. In fact, let's not even talk about it. Take it out of our history books so no one will ever ask what we've done to right those wrongs." The story of David and Bathsheba shows us that mercy and accountability are separate things; and we have no business asking for the former while refusing to accept the latter.

When King David was eager to build a Temple to the Lord in Jerusalem, God told him no. He was not allowed to build God's house because he had blood on his hands. It was Bathsheba's son, Solomon, who would get that honor and who would succeed David as king. But despite all of it, David comes back to God over and over—not to complain about his restrictions, not to say it was all so long ago that everything should be wiped clean now, but through prayer and repentance, to keep renewing and restoring the relationship that mattered above all else; his relationship with the Lord, who was his shepherd and who restored his soul. May we learn from him, face our own sins, and allow God to restore our souls as well. Amen.