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**“Royal Flush”
A sermon by Judy E. Pidcock**

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Philippians 2:5–11; Psalm 14; 2 Samuel 11:1–15; 22–27

When I read this first sentence of the story of David and Bathsheba, I have the same feeling that I have in some movies. Things are ambling along smoothly for the characters until one bad decision triggers a whole sequence of bad decisions, and pretty soon, the movie is in a downward spiral toward disaster. You and I can see the tragic mistake from the comfort of our theater seats. “If only...” we think, with the perfect vision every actor seems to lack. “Things could have been so different.”

David’s story is like your best roller-coaster ride: a long climb toward the highest height, a breathless pause at the top where the view is spectacular and the air is clear, and every great thing is out there in front of you, then a thundering, accelerating scramble of fear and wonder and surprise. Some of us arrive at the end of a roller coaster ride with a pain that lingers and a nagging question: *What was I thinking? Why did I do that?*

And those will be the questions David asks himself for the remainder of his life. *What was I thinking? Why did I do that?* “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.” The first ten chapters of 2 Samuel show that David is the beloved Warrior King who takes the throne from Saul and overcomes any claimants to Saul’s throne. He commands the love and respect of soldiers and citizens. He reigns with justice and equality, the scriptures tell us. “And the Lord gave victory to David wherever he went.” David is sitting in the front car of that great roller coaster. He loves the risk. He has the best seat possible. Everyone else on this ride is following him. The view for David just keeps getting better and better and better.

“In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel... but David remained at Jerusalem.” David stayed home. Although David will forever be known for his selfish, criminal grasping of Bathsheba, I think this is where it all begins to unravel for him. Right here in verse one, before he even sees Bathsheba on that fateful afternoon. David sent his armies, but David stayed home. The Warrior King becomes the Reclining King. He gives up the chase in favor of the chaise lounge. This is a bad decision which will necessitate other bad decisions. This is the start of the downhill ride.

Actions have consequences. Something crucial happens when we distance ourselves from the consequences of our actions. Something cracks in our moral structure when we detach ourselves from the impact of our choices. This single verse is the pivotal shift in 2 Samuel, from a tale of military power to a story of moral failure. (Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*) David dispatches his troops to fight a war he himself will not participate in. He asks his men to take a risk that he will not take, although he is their leader. The decision to go to war carries no real personal risk for the king who decides to stay home.

And so it is with Bathsheba. This is no love story. This is the story of a king who uses his power to grasp what pleases him, with no regard for the results. He asks for Bathsheba's name, but he will not call her by name, because her name betrays her attachments – daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite. Her name speaks of flesh and blood, lineage, and commitments. David wants Bathsheba, but he doesn't want to deal with all of the complications that a night with Bathsheba brings. Yet, seizing another man's wife has tricky consequences for the king on the couch, so he dispatches Joab to clean up the mess. Joab, throughout David's reign, will be the go-to guy for David's personal troubles. Joab is the fawning "yes-man" that every politician with great power needs. Joab must clean up the Uriah problem and later on the Amnon and Tamar and Absalom problem, that sordid story of David's children that lies farther down the line on this royal roller coaster ride.

Actions have consequences. Something critical happens when we remove ourselves from the consequences of our decisions. Something cracks in our moral structure when we detach ourselves from the impact of our choices. *The Washington Post* ran a story last Sunday about the torture of suspected terrorist Abu Zubaida at a prison in Thailand. Zubaida was waterboarded eighty-three times over the course of four or five days, and two CIA contractors on-site concluded that the waterboarding should be stopped. But CIA officials sitting at the Counterterrorist Center on the other side of the globe in suburban D.C. insisted that the punishment should be continued for another 30 days. "The two men [carrying out the torture in Thailand] threatened to quit if the waterboarding continued and insisted that officials from Langley come to Thailand to watch the procedure," reports *The Washington Post*. "After a CIA delegation arrived [from the U.S.], Abu Zubaida was strapped down one more time. As water poured over his cloth-covered mouth, he gasped for breath. "They all watched, and then they all agreed to stop," the former official said." (*The Washington Post*, 7/19/09, article by Joby Warrick and Peter Finn)

William Saletan writes in his *Washington Post* blog "Human Nature": "I'm not ruling out water-boarding. But before you tell your pals around the water cooler that it's a vital interrogation tool... check out one of the demonstrations on the Internet... The same goes for any other violent or lethal practice you countenance from the comfort of your desk. Capital punishment? Watch an execution. Eating meat? Check out a slaughterhouse. Abortion? Peruse the video library or, if the pregnancy is yours, look at an ultrasound. And don't think that opposing these practices insulates you from the same responsibility. If you think capital punishment is never warranted, acquaint yourself with the handiwork of a few murderers. Before you defund international family-planning agencies, meet some malnourished children. You're entitled to your opinion. But you're not entitled to your ignorance. Go educate yourself. It's worth leaving the comfort of your desk, even if you work at Langley" (Human Nature: Science, Technology and Life, 7/20/09).

Actions have consequences. That's a lesson we begin to learn as toddlers, when we're assigned to the Time-Out Chair or denied dessert after dinner. The sooner we learn that lesson, and the tighter we hang on to that lesson, no matter the scale of the action, the better off we are. Good parents continue teaching that lesson until their children are launched. When you don't study, your grades fall. Who hasn't had to turn in the cell phone or relinquish the car keys for a breach of family rules? At our house, Facebook is a bargaining chip with power and might. As we get older, our actions have emotional consequences. Sometimes, the rift between siblings widens as calls or letters go unreturned. Cheating in the workplace follows us from job to job. Hurtful disagreements never get patched up. Our faults are legion – what we have done and what we have left undone. What we all need is a little Joab in our life – someone who will go off and clean up the unpleasantness that our bad choices have created.

But unpleasantness is an understatement in David's case. People have died as a consequence of his grasp for power. Uriah the Hittite is every general's dream: loyal, self-sacrificing, committed to the cause when he himself isn't even an Israelite. But Uriah must be killed. Not because of anything he has done, but

because of the egregious mistake David has done. Lives are lost as David luxuriates in his power. Uriah and his comrades have done nothing more than trusted their leader, who has ordered their death.

Several years ago, Roger Shattuck wrote an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled “When Evil is Cool.” (January, 1999) He makes the argument that there are four types of evil, and the most dangerous of the four is metaphysical evil: “an attitude of assent and approval toward moral and radical evil, as evidence of superior human will and power.” Shattuck describes an evil which simply dismisses horrific events as part of the inevitable course of history. Something we can’t address or change. This becomes a way of distancing ourselves from or explaining away the atrocities of the world so that we’re no longer offended by them. We tell ourselves that we have no real responsibility. It’s just the way the world works. Metaphysical evil dilutes the true strength of cause and effect and then washes it away.

Something critical happens when you and I don’t feel the impact of our decisions. Something shifts in our moral structure when we dodge the consequences of our choices. It is the lesson of Nixon and Watergate: the break in was bad enough. But the cover up was even more offensive. One morally-bankrupt deed triggers another. And another. And another. Until we’re all back in that movie theater watching the old, old story spinning downward, out of control into moral decay. Bad enough that the king has slept with Bathsheba. Bad enough that the king has ordered Uriah’s death. Bad enough that Joab has carried out the dirty deed. Now the king tries to explain it away so they will both feel better about what has been done. “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours now one and now another.”

Who is David kidding? This was a murder: planned and strategized to the last detail. But David is the king who stayed home. The king who stayed away from the clash of swords, the terror in the soldiers’ eyes, the confusion on Uriah’s face as he was sent on a death march to the most dangerous position no military leader would choose. This is the king who deftly avoided the stench of blood, the crush of bodies, the life slowly draining out of loyal young men – fathers and husbands, brothers and sons – who only wanted to serve their king. No real consequences felt by David back on the couch in Jerusalem. “This was no evil thing...” he says, “... just the way of the sword... first one, then another.” We can almost hear him yawn. David’s most heinous crime isn’t that he waged war with Uriah as the target, although that offends us deeply. David’s more egregious crime is that he tries to dismiss it as “all in a day’s work.”

What is it about power? What is it about political power that distorts and deludes? Why is it that Uriah’s life was so expendable? That Bathsheba’s marriage covenant was so deniable? That David’s impulsiveness trumped Uriah’s faithfulness? Time and again, scripture shows us contrasting images of power. David seems to ascend the throne wearing a royal pair of glasses with which he now views the world. The new lenses blur everything, including the lines between right and wrong. They blur the size and scale of enormous mistakes. They distort distance, making kings feel that everything and everyone is within their grasp. Political power makes rulers imagine that moral codes are written by kings and princes and not by God. What was once wrong in the eyes of all nations is now “no evil thing” according to David. Read again today’s Psalm 14 – a psalm attributed to David. See how he judges others so harshly but fails to turn the judgment on himself. There is an arrogance to power, a presumed supremacy of thought. It was Emerson who said, “We believe in ourselves as we do not believe in others. We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others is experiment for us.”

“Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes” declares the king. “But the thing was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” declares 2 Samuel. God is the silent character in this political thriller, watching over the shepherd boy chosen by God to lead the people chosen by God. Yahweh is the divine silent partner riding the precarious roller coaster that will be David’s life. God sees the evil of his actions as surely as God sees the possibilities of his reign. David does not get a free pass for his sins. There will be no compromise on moral codes, no rewriting laws of right and wrong to accommodate the errant king. Eventually, there will be condemnation and justice and repentance. David will forever be known as Israel’s greatest king,

yet David will forever be known as the king who took Bathsheba. The consequences of David's actions will break him, but they will not defeat him. Strength will always be tempered by weakness.

David grasps, plots, covers up, and denies. All good ingredients of Washington's seamiest scandals. Something draws us in. This is a tale so disillusioning that 1 Chronicles will omit it altogether, and 1 Samuel will pretty it up. Revising history is an ancient practice. Why does 2 Samuel tell this sordid story in all its detail and depth? Because we need to hear it. Because it helps us to see ourselves more accurately. Because it helps us to understand God more fully. That's why we read the Bible: to know God and to know ourselves. Try as we might to deny the regrettable events of our lives, the larger Biblical story is all about God's *immersion* in the events of our lives. Although David stumbles in leadership, Yahweh will not let him go. Actions have consequences. And divine actions have divine consequences. God's covenant made so long ago will not break. It will not be withdrawn.

Today, we celebrate the baptism of Alexander Stob. Baptism is the church's sacramental claim that through Christ, God will never let us go. When we baptize in the church, you and I stand together to make some weighty promises. It is a courageous thing to pledge to another what God has pledged to us. We promise that we will be immersed in this child's life. That no matter our stumbling along the way, God will be present with us, and we will be present with one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We will join the cloud of witnesses who encourage this boy in his faith. Helping them when he falters. Reassuring him when he doubts. There will be grace and joy and acceptance in our life together.

Maybe the Christian life really is like your best roller coaster ride: a mixture of highest heights and deepest depths. Times when the way seems dark and terrifying. Times when you are at the top where the view is spectacular and the air is clear and you're confident that God is right there riding beside you. Maybe you look behind at the great cloud of witnesses who have brought you to this place and who make the ride with you, nudging you forward, sharing the trip. And deep down, you know with certainty that no matter the scramble of wonder and surprise that may lie ahead, you will arrive safely at the end, secure and held fast. Then maybe, we'll be like little kids at amusement parks who turn to each other – flushed with delight – and say, “Gosh! That was so great! Can we do it all again?” Amen.