David the King and Sinner

What makes a good person good? What makes a bad person bad? Today we’re going to talk about David the king. David is often called a man after God’s own heart. He is credited with writing many of the Psalms. He restored God’s temple. He led a new era in Israel’s history. When Jesus came, he pointed to David as the picture of a good king, and called himself David son. So we can see, that David was a good man.

But then, we have the story. David is looking out on his roof. He sees Bathsheba, beautiful in the moonlight, taking a bath. He is filled with lust. He discovers who she is; in fact, he learns that she is the wife of one of his loyal soldiers, Uriah. He calls for her and she comes to him. She becomes pregnant and now he has a problem. What is he to do? How can he face Uriah?

To hide the pregnancy, he calls for Uriah in hopes that he will come to Bathsheba and everyone will think the child is his. But there’s a wrinkle in the plan. Uriah is so loyal that he refuses to go to Bathsheba. He does not think it’s is right to enjoy his wife while his fellow soldiers are fighting. David even get some drunk hoping that he will go home. But
he does not. So, David hatches a murderous plan.

He gives Uriah a message to take to Joab. The message says, “put David in the middle of the battle. When the battle is hot, withdraw and leave Uriah there.” There is no better place to commit a murder than on a battlefield. Only Joab knows his secret.

David thinks he’s got away with this plan. He marries Bathsheba. She has his child. But, it is not true that only Joab knows hissecret. God knows. And God can tell whomever God wants. God speaks through the prophet Nathan:

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.”

This story raises David’s ire. I don’t know if it’s the good David or the bad David who gets so angry. He declares that this man must pay back fourfold. But Nathan replies, “thou art the man.” David was a rich man, Uriah was the poor man, Bathsheba was the sheep. God had given David everything, but David was not content. Nathan declares God’s punishment. David was to receive punishment from within his own house. And this is what happened. His own son Absalom will rebel against him, conquer him, and take David’s wives as his own.

David repents, but it is too late. Traditionally, our psalm for today is ascribed to David in poetic repentance after his transgression with Bathsheba. It is one of my favorite psalms.

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
51:2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.  
51:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.  
51:4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.  
51:5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.  
51:6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
51:8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
51:9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.  
51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.  
51:11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
51:12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

In this psalm, David acknowledges his own sinfulness. Although his sin was great against Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab, and his own nation, which this sin starts on the road to great ruin, the truth is that it is God who watches over all and has a stake in every wrong deed. When we betray our friends, we betray God. When we lie to a neighbor, we lie to God, too. When we steal from others, we also steal from God.

David also notes, without trying to justify himself, that this is the way he as always been, from his mother’s womb. If we are honest, we know this is true. Who can remember a time when they were truly innocent? And, though every child is lovely and special in his or her own way, who has not seen even young children act with casual cruelty and selfishness, the way David did? The only difference was that David, in his great power, could be cruel and selfish and effect a lot more people.

And David cries out to God to change his heart, to grant him the Holy Spirit, who can make these changes.

What makes a good person good? What makes a bad person bad?

David did wickedly evil things. David was humble and willing to admit to his faults. David needed God’s Holy Spirit to change him.

In our gospel lesson, the people asked Jesus what they needed to do in order to do God’s work — in other words, what could they do to be good people. Jesus’s answer was a simple one: to believe in the one whom God had sent, to place their trust and reliance on Jesus; all their goodness would flow from this. Like David, our badness will not be extinguished in this life, but, like David we can return again and again to God, and ask God to create a new heart and spirit in us.

Take a few moments to pray silently.

Read Psalm 51.