

King #Me Too!

July 29, 2018

Grace to you, and peace—from our loving Redeemer, who refused to be made King, Jesus Christ.

The story of King David as related here in our reading from II Samuel is quite the tale, isn't it? In Bible Study this past week, we read it as a story about how God works through flawed characters; about forgiveness; about choices; and about how systems can corrupt us. But the theme I want to pick up for today is how David, in his relationship with Bathsheba, is a testament to arbitrary power and its unintended, violent and destructive consequences.

You may, or may not, know David's story. He was a poor shepherd boy, who was initially overlooked as his older brothers were being recruited to go fight the Philistines—Israel's most ruthless and fearsome foe. Sort of like the Bears and the Packers—only with a lot more blood. Or like the U.S. and Russia used to be . . .

Anyway, David was small and insignificant, and then by a strange turn of events he wound up killing Goliath of Gath—the most fearsome of the fearsome Philistines. He did this not wearing the King's armor, which was too heavy for him as a still-young man; he was a boy, really. He killed Goliath with a sling-shot—with a stone right to Goliath's head. And then—trigger warning here—some *really* violent things happened after that: David took a sword, cut off Goliath's head, and took it to show off to the then King, Saul, who was so impressed by this grisly gift that he took David into his court.

So, this David was a killer right from the start—let's make no mistake about that. But David was also a musician and a poet. Apparently his music both inspired and soothed. After his big debut against Goliath, David eventually got wrapped up in a power struggle with Saul—with Saul even trying to kill David out of jealousy. This kingship stuff is ugly, violent business. Politics hasn't changed much over the centuries, has it?

Eventually, Saul dies in battle against the Philistines, alongside three of his sons, including Jonathan—who loved David, and vice versa. And so David in a few years ascends to the kingship—and that brings us to his rape of Bathsheba, and his murder of Uriah, after a failed effort to cover up his infidelity.

And we thought the stories that got buried by the National Enquirer about President Trump's affairs were big news! Wow! What more can you say? I should just stop right here, throw down the mic, and say—you draw the conclusion! And yet, despite his brutish behavior, David went on to be the greatest hero in the history of Israel; the greatest King from whose line came Jesus, according to tradition. Jonathan Kirsch in his biography of David calls him “the original Alpha male.” And that toxic masculinity produced its devastating consequences in the life of Bathsheba and Uriah—and, eventually, for all of Israel.

Someday I'd love to preach on "The Gospel According to Bathsheba." Imagine this story from her perspective—the Bible's most dramatic #me too tale! It's made for Hollywood, right? And there was a film in 1951—starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, directed by Darryl Zanuck. I haven't seen it, but I'm guessing it's a lot like "The Ten Commandments."

Still, we need an updating of this ancient story: David and Bathsheba in modern America. A killer King willing to rape his citizens and send his own generals to their death. David, of course, atones for his sins—and repents—but it is from this point in his story that his family life is all downhill—as the Prophet Samuel foretells in the reading we'll hear next week.

But the key question for us isn't about the historical David; it's about us: where are *we* in this tale? Let me put it this way: have you ever been tempted to act arbitrarily—at work or at home? I have. Have you ever been driven by lust—by a desire so strong that you simply must obey it? I have. We may not be kings (or queens), but we all know the temptation to act like one: we all have our own "King Me!" moments.

And yet we all also have our #me too tales, like Bathsheba's. We've all been hurt by arbitrary power. We've all experienced the unintended consequences of force and violence in our lives. So how do we get out of this cycle of victimizing and victimhood?

Jesus shows us the way, doesn't he?

Kings and Queens tend to do two things with their power, sometimes simultaneously. They dominate—often brutally. Or they escape into the distractions of their own desires, made possible by the wealth and power of their privileges. The first path leads to sadism—a key fact of much political life. And the second leads to irresponsible consumption and corruption—call it greed.

David's story in II Samuel gives us a classic demonstration of how these two different features of kingship worked together. David could dominate Bathsheba, and so he did. He took what he wanted; regardless of the consequences. And yet he was supposed to be on the battlefield—it was spring, the writer of Samuel informs us, the season when Kings go to war. So David was shirking his responsibilities. Uriah was on the battlefield; David was not.

The story then points us to a contrast—between the loyalty and faithfulness of Uriah, and the arbitrary sadism and corruption of David.

And it is Uriah—the faithful one—who winds up dead; having carried the letter sealing his own fate with him back to the front.

Yet this is, in fact, also the story of Christ: the story of the one who refused to be king, and who yet became the King of the Universe.

The key verse from our gospel for today then is John 6:15: “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Unlike kings, or politicians, or journalists, for that matter—God’s perspective is long—hardly just tied to the next election cycle. So when Jesus withdraws, he’s not giving up on his calling: he’s showing how it’s not tied up with force and violence; it *can’t* be tied up with force and violence, and still be God’s calling.

And so there it is for us, too. The kind of leadership that God inspires is leadership that is anything but arbitrary.

God in Jesus shows us how slow and steady wins the race. Sometimes, as Pastor Bridget put it in her sermon on “The Compassion Cycle” last week, we need to withdraw and rest a bit in order to be the person God intends us to be.

And when we have that God’s-eye perspective: that LONG view of things, we may be less likely to fall into the temptations that come our way in our own “King Me” moments. And, when we have a God’s-eye perspective, we’ll be less likely to be devastated by one version or another of our “Me Too” moments, as well.

Because the God who made David King could also let him do the most deplorable things—rape and murder—that humans can imagine. That didn’t change who God was; but it changed David, and it changed history (as we shall see, again, next week—come back to learn more!)

So, whatever the temptation it is you face, you can rest assured that God is constancy incarnate. God doesn’t act arbitrarily. God in Jesus Christ isn’t about kingship as we understand it. God in Jesus Christ is about giving life so that we might have life. God in Jesus Christ is about grace so rich and deep that we can never exhaust it. God in Jesus Christ is the power that can lift us above whatever temptation we face. And that means we can live differently than the world. We can prioritize different things than mere competitive power and its attendant lust.

For instance, last week I spent a few hours remodeling my son’s basement. At one point, there were four generations of Pahl men in that basement—my father, Fred; me; my son, Nathan; and my grandson, Jaxon. It was beautiful. It was simple. It was politically insignificant—and yet so much more meaningful than any mere political act.

You see, I had choices about where to go in my life when it became clear that we were going to leave our big old Victorian home and our friends in Philadelphia. There were paths that would have led me to leadership and power, as the world understands it. I could have been a king! But I would not have had the simple pleasure of spending time with my father, and son, and grandson—if I had chosen that path.

So, the point in our Gospel for today and the point of the story of David and Bathsheba and Uriah—indeed the point of Jesus’ entire life and ministry—which was judged a failure by the world, is that God gives us each moment in life as a gift to be savored in all

of its sweetness. And when we recognize the gift of life, we don't grasp after the power to dominate others, like David did. When we recognize the gift of life, we don't have to scheme our way to success, or to cover up our failures, like David did. When we recognize the gift of life, we don't worry even when death stares us in the face, because we know that God has a LONG point of view, and that God has our back. God feeds us. God saves us. God sustains us.

From God flows all goodness, all truth, all beauty. From God flows *our* capacity to flow—to relish time and place; to be present with and for another. Jesus wasn't about kingly power and its paltry politics. God in Jesus was about the true love that heals all wounds. God in Jesus was about the power that binds up the broken-hearted. God in Jesus was about the compassion that brings solace to the suffering. God in Jesus was about love incarnate, the breath of life for all the living, and the joy of communion in the company of friends. I'm so glad Jesus lifted me!

May we all be glad as Jesus lifts us up, together—here at Union Congregational United Church of Christ, in Green Bay, Wisconsin. And may the world find such gladness, not in greed or lust for power, but in the amazing grace of the living, loving God. Amen.

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1 Samuel 11:1-15; John 6:1-21
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