

The Abuse of Power

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 1988. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 12:1-14; Psalm 32; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

King David was safe at home in the palace while the troops were off in the hills fighting. One afternoon while walking on the ramparts of his palace he saw a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, bathing in her home and he wanted her. He sent messengers and took her even though he already had a wife. He slept with her and she got pregnant. To complicate matters the woman had a husband, Uriah, who was out of town with the troops fighting for the King. So David planned a royal cover-up. He recalled Uriah from the front lines for a little rest and relaxation. He expected Uriah to go home and sleep with his wife so that he'll think he's the father of the child. ~~It was a clever scheme but it had one flaw. David didn't count on~~ the loyalty of Uriah. He refused to go home with his wife while his friends are off being killed in battle. So David came up with another scheme. He got Uriah drunk hoping to weaken his will not to go home and sleep with his wife. Instead, Uriah, fell asleep in the servants quarter. David was desperate now. He knew Uriah was going to figure out that the baby isn't his. So David sent Uriah back to the front lines with a sealed envelope for his commander, a sealed envelope that contained Uriah's death warrant. Uriah's commanding officer was instructed to place Uriah in the front lines and then beat a hasty retreat and let Uriah be killed. So Uriah was killed. I imagine that he was buried with full military honors and that the king attended the funeral and gave a wonderful speech praising Uriah's patriotism. Then David sent and brought Bathsheba to his palace and married her. For a while it seemed like David's schemes had succeeded but he failed to take God into account. God sent the prophet Nathan to David to

confront him with the Word of God.

I've always read that story from the standpoint of David. It always meant one simple thing to me. Don't look at a naked girl unless you're married to her. Adultery can be a fatal attraction that leads to lies and, sometimes, even to murder. But as I thought about the story I began to realize that it can be more fully understood if we look at it from the view point of Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan as well as David. When I placed myself in the shoes of those characters I began to hear God say so much more to me.

1. Put yourself in the shoes of Bathsheba. She was one of the victims of King David's abuse of power. He saw her and he took her, the Bible says. So many women today are victims of the abuse of power. I heard, just yesterday, disturbing news that a majority of men on college campuses believe that most women who are raped have given some kind of encouragement to the person who has assaulted them. "Rape isn't the man's fault, it's the woman's fault", they're saying.

When we think of the Bakker or the Swaggart scandal so often our attention focuses on the men and what their sins have done to *them*. But what have their sins done to the women? The tragedy of the Jim Bakker affair isn't just one man's sin of adultery. His followers will probably forgive him. He may even regain all that he's lost. But what has the misuse of his power done to Jessica Hahn? How has it affected her trust in an all powerful God? How does the male imagery with which we usually speak of God affect her now? Having once been victimized by the power and charisma of Bakker, now she has been victimized by the power and charisma of Hugh Hefner into whose mansion she moved after the Bakker scandal broke. This is the way it goes so often. Women get out of one

abusive relationship only to get involved in others. I wasn't therefore surprised when I discovered in our G.A.'s report on pornography that more than 80% of the women involved in the pornographic film industry were victims of childhood sexual abuse.

The story of David and Bathsheba takes on a whole new meaning when we listen to it from the standpoint of victimized women. Nathan's rebuke of David is a word of judgment against those who exploit women. But it's also a word of hope to women. God isn't an all-powerful man who comes to intimidate and assault you. God takes the side of the victims of the misuse of power. God has come to you in Jesus Christ that you might know that in Christ that there is neither male nor female, but all are one in him.

2. Bathsheba wasn't the only one who fell victim to the misuse of David's power. Think of Uriah. He wasn't a Jew. He was a Hittite. He wasn't a member of the people of God. He was from another country, hired by David to do his fighting. He was a pawn in the game of war that political rulers so often play. Like so many foot soldiers, Uriah was expendable. He was willing to die for his king, but his king had him snuffed out when it served his selfish purpose. The story of Uriah is the story of all oppressed and powerless men, victims of the policies and greed of powerful political leaders. It's the story of the men, women and children caught in the cross-fire of revolution in Central America or caught up in the evil system of apartheid in South Africa. It's meant to give hope to those who are oppressed. It's meant to show us that God defends the powerless, the weak, the oppressed and that he will vindicate them. They hear this story as a message of hope, which says that it's possible to stand up to those who abuse power, and to say no.

3. Thirdly we can listen to this story from the viewpoint of Nathan.

Nathan was a prophet of God called to preach God's Word. I also have been called by God to preach God's Word and when I think of Nathan it frightens me. If I were Nathan I can imagine God saying to me. "Nathan, I want you to confront David with his sin and pronounce my judgment against these heinous acts." I can imagine my response, "Lord, I really need a vacation." But God says a vacation is out of the question until I've confronted David with God's Word. So I say to God, "Lord, I have this really great sermon on John 3:16 about your love that I think David needs to hear." God responds, "That's not what I have in mind. I want you to confront David specifically about his adultery, deception and murder." "Well, how about if I just preach a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments?" But the Lord says, "No. He wouldn't apply it to himself." But I still resist, "Lord, I've spent a lot of time building up trust and confidence with David so that he'd be open to your Word. We have a really good relationship now and I'm afraid it's going to be destroyed if I come on too strong. Not only that he's liable to kill me."

But Nathan resisted the temptation to be untrue to his calling. He had the courage to stand eye-ball to eye-ball with the most powerful man in the nation and say, "Thou art the man." I want to have that kind of courage as a Minister of the Word of God. But how do I get that courage. Nathan had courage because he was committed to One more ultimate than the king. He loved the king too much to remain silent. Nathan put his comfortable situation as a chaplain to the king on the line. He put his life on the line. Nathan survived. But it's not always the case that those who stand up against the abuse of power survive. Jesus said that we're more likely to get killed.

What if there had been no Nathan? What if Ministers of the Word of God

don't have the courage today to speak specifically and personally to those who misuse their power as David did? Martin Niemoller, was a submarine commander during WW1, a German patriot. After WW1 he became a Lutheran pastor. When Hitler first came to power Niemoller was unhappy but he kept quiet. He didn't want to be criticised for mixing religion and politics and he didn't want people to think that he lacked patriotism. But there came a time when he could remain quiet no longer. He preached a series of sermons entitled, *Christus ist mein Fuhrer* (Christ Is My Leader). In those sermons he confessed that since Christ was his "leader", Hitler could *not* be his *Fuhrer*. Hitler and Jesus were going in two different directions and he had to choose. There can't be two highest allegiances but only one. And to say yes to Christ is to say no to Hitler.

They came and arrested Niemoller and he spent seven years in a concentration camp. He wrote, "When they came for the communists I was silent because I was not a communist. When they came for the labor unionists, I was silent because I was not a union man. When they came for the Catholics, I was silent because I was not a Catholic. When they came for the Jews I was silent, because I was not a Jew. When they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me."

Thank God there are still Nathans today. I've seen and heard something of the spirit of Nathan in Alexander Solshenitzyn, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Tutu, Allen Boesak, and Bishop Oscar Romero. May God enable us to hear God's word in the words of his prophets today so that God might confront us with our sin and so that we might repent and know God's forgiveness and loving discipline.