

## “Sex in the City”

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July 30, 2006  
Text: II Samuel 11:1-15; 17

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In addition to being an Andy Griffith show nut, I'm also a movie buff – especially many of the older ones. I particularly enjoy movies directed by Billy Wilder – “The Lost Weekend,” “Sunset Boulevard,” “Some Like It Hot,” and two of my very favorites “Witness for the Prosecution” and “Stalag 17.” The other evening I watched another of Wilder's movies – “Double Indemnity,” (1944), starring Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, and Edward G. Robinson. It's the story of two duplicitous and callous lovers – a shrewd and dissatisfied femme fatale housewife and a likeable insurance salesman. Their calculated cold-blooded scheme to brutally murder her husband for purposes of lustful desire and financial gain, because of a double indemnity clause in his accident policy, ultimately fails. The film was unlike many other films of its time – its storyline of a deliberate and brutal crime was considered objectionable and distasteful by the movie industry's censors. Did you know the film's story was based on a real-life crime in 1927? A New York housewife persuaded her lover to kill her husband after having her spouse take out a \$50,000 insurance policy with a double indemnity clause. While the “Double Indemnity” movie was based on a 20th Century incident, the plot itself goes back about 30 centuries to 1,000 B.C.

It was springtime in Jerusalem, the season of birds and bees and afternoon strolls on the roof for a dose of cool breezes. It was also the time when kings went out to battle. But not all kings. King David sent Joab and the troops out to battle while he lounged about high atop the palace, which gave him a spectacular view of the Holy City below. Just think how far he'd come – once a humble shepherd boy – now a king who could be commander in chief from Camp David – the comfort of his own palace. Napping on the rooftop and upon awaking, seeing a beautiful woman taking a bath. (I had to smile when I watched “Double Indemnity” and noticed that the first time Fred MacMurray's Walter meets Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis, she is wearing only a towel, having just come in from sunbathing.)

David was so struck by this woman that he dispatched a royal messenger to find out who she was. He was told that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Messengers were again sent to fetch her. David saw. He sent. He took. He lay. There was no long tortured wrestling with conscience. King David exercised his autonomy and royal power and engaged in sexual intercourse with her. Sex in the city. The scriptures tell us that it was not safe sex in the city. Bathsheba became pregnant.

Now because Bathsheba's husband Uriah was off fighting with the rest of David's army, she realized Uriah would know the child wasn't his. So Bathsheba told David and he hatched a plan to hide his adultery. He called Uriah in from the field, ostensibly to get news of the battle. What he really wanted was for Uriah to spend some time with his own wife, to sleep with her so that he would think he was the father of her child. The euphemism that the story uses for this is David's suggestion that Uriah go home and wash his feet. However, Uriah threw a wrench into the works. Even though he was a non-Israelite, Uriah knew that Israelite rules of holy warfare too well to go home and sleep with his wife. Israelite soldiers weren't allowed to have sexual relations while on campaign. Such activity caused ritual impurity inconsistent with waging holy war. David had hope that Uriah wasn't concerned with Israelite covenant law. But he was wrong. Uriah ended up sacking out at the entrance of the king's house, instead of going down to his own home. Even when David presented Uriah with gifts and later tried to get him so drunk that he would forget himself, Uriah, the Hittite behaved himself like a virtuous Israelite soldier.

Well, David thought, so much for Plan A; how about Plan B? David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it with Uriah, who had no clue he was the bearer of his own death warrant. The letter told Joab to put Uriah on the front line and then draw back so that he would be killed. David effectively murdered Uriah without having to lift a finger of his own to accomplish it. Thus, by the end of the story, David, for the sake of sexual attraction, had become an abuser of power, a possible rapist, and a multiple murder.

So how do you feel about David, the shepherd boy now? Earlier this summer, we spent some time lifting up David for his battle against Goliath – for taking on a giant – for facing incredible odds all in the name of the Lord. We later extolled David's virtues of his friendship with Jonathan, and being able to speak well of Saul even when Saul had tried to undermine and kill David. But today, we hear, as Paul Harvey would say, the rest of the story. What do we do with the rest of David's story? Some of us might put it in the category of T.M.I. – too much information. We really don't want to know all that about David. We wish Scripture wouldn't tarnish our hero. Let the Bible be a witness to David's virtues, not his vices. What can a story of an affair and a cover up and a murder have to say to us?

One scholar suggests that it speaks to us of our human frailty and David's sudden unplanned lust for Bathsheba. Vulnerable spots in our character where there is always some danger of being corrupted; life situations where the difference between standing tall and falling short is paper thin. For many, including David, the point of vulnerability is in the expression of sexuality – not necessarily scheming promiscuous people – but those who are unexpectedly drawn into temptation and fall. In “Double Indemnity,” Walter Neff says this upon seeing Phyllis Dietrichson for the first time: “I wasn’t interested in insurance or auto renewals, or Mr. Dietrichson, nor anything else. I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she had looked at me, and I wanted to see her again, closer, without that silly staircase between us.” The weak spot may be sex, or greed, or wanting to fit in with everybody, or self-righteousness, or envy, or anger, or power, or fame, or food or drink, or gambling, or the internet. Most of us are vulnerable to something.

So the story of David is a reminder of the human frailty we all share. It's also a reminder of our willfulness, our tendency to willfully undertake actions which we know are against the Spirit and will of God. That's the road David took after his adultery with Bathsheba. He attempted to cover up the evil he'd done with yet more evil.

We often do the same to a lesser degree. We know what we are doing is not right – we know that – but we do it anyway, in spite of the hurt we cause ourselves and others, in spite of all the consequences and guilt we know we'll suffer later. And then we often do more wrong to cover our tracks. In “Double Indemnity,” after deciding to kill Phyllis' husband, Walter says to her: “You're gonna do it and I'm gonna help you. We're gonna do it and we're gonna do it right. And I'm the guy that knows how. It's got to be perfect.”

Beyond these reminders of our frailty and our willfulness, what is there from this story that can be helpful for the community of faith? Why include this part of David's life and witness in holy scripture?

Perhaps we could ask the question a different way. What would Scripture look like if people such as David and Saul and Jezebel and Moses, the murderer, and Paul, the prosecutor, weren't included? What if people had been left out who, no matter how great, after all was said and done, were ordinary sinners?

If David and people like him were not in the Bible there would be little hope for people like us. No matter how important or unimportant we may be in the eyes of the world, we are all quite common in the eyes of God in at least two respects. First, we are all common sinners. And all of our own attempts to make our sin better, to cover it up, to get rid of it in the waste basket, are miserable failures. All our attempts cannot remove it from our hearts or from the sight of God.

The second way we are common is that we are all loved in common, all bathed in the uncommon love of God. It is God alone who can remove our sin. We cannot be perfect, though we may try, to the great expense of others, and though we may convince ourselves that we are, to the great expense of ourselves. But God can make us whole, and does. David, though a sinner, was loved. And while God could not tolerate the sin, God also could not tolerate the separation from the sinner.

David is later convicted by Nathan for his sin with Bathsheba. The child they conceived through adultery dies. But David remains God's chosen king, and the couple's next child succeeds David on the throne. There's no clear way to account for the mixture of virtue and vice in the person of David, yet flawed as he was, he was still God's beloved. After David confesses to Nathan, Nathan tells him: “The Lord has put away your sin.” David is granted forgiveness. We, like David, on the right afternoon, after a good lunch, are susceptible to great sin. And we, like David, when exposed to the right Bible story, on the right Sunday morning, are subject to great forgiveness. Amen.

(Thanks to Leonard Sweet and Deanna Wilson for background material for this sermon.)