

CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: URIAH THE HITTITE

II Samuel 11:6-17

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well.

I.

One of the stories in the Bible that is well known – but perhaps not well appropriated – is that of David and Bathsheba. At the point that David has risen to his height of achievement as King of Israel, he forces himself on a beautiful woman named Bathsheba, whom he sees bathing on the rooftop of an adjacent building late in the afternoon, when he has arisen from a nap after having sent his troops into battle against the Ammonites.¹

- The fact that King David is one of the two or three most revered people in Israel's history and that within Christianity Jesus was often referred to as Son of David;²
- The fact that David and Bathsheba have been treated in the popular mind as a couple with power, glamour, and beauty;³
- The fact that Michealangelo's statute of David is one of the most widely-known works of art in human history –

All can combine to lead us to *overlook* or simply *not connect* with the reality that what David did to Bathsheba *violated* her as a woman and a human being, *violated* his marriage vows, *violated* his role as King of Israel,

¹ II Samuel 11:1-5.

² Matthew 1:1.

³ It is worth reading the Wikipedia article, both summarizing the movie, its reviews, and criticism of it coming from different directions. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_and_Bathsheba_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_and_Bathsheba_(film)).

and, given that her husband was one of his leading military officers,⁴ *violated* his role as “Commander in Chief.”

In addition, those of us who are vaguely aware of what David did can easily tend to whitewash it. Many of us don’t realize that after his rape of Bathsheba, he seeks to cover up his paternity of the child she announces to him that she shall bear⁵ by arranging for the death of her husband Uriah on the battlefield, leading us to choose between whether the crime is worse than the coverup or the coverup is worse than the crime, a grisly choice in this instance.

In my years of preaching and teaching, David is one of three or four Biblical characters I have most studied and sought to understand. As I have shared with you in class if not from this chancel, in the summer of 2018 I had penciled in a summer sermon series on David as I had done in the summer of 2006, but when the Me Too Movement broke the prior fall, I knew I was not ready to preach about David in a constructive way. I have been largely silent on David since 2018, though my interest in him enormously high if for no other reason than I believe the best narrative writing in the Bible occurs between I Samuel 8 and I Kings 2, the many chapters that cover David’s rise and fall.

II.

Today’s character in our summer sermon series is Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba’s husband, David’s military officer. Though we might forget about Uriah – or never have noticed him – the Biblical narrator does not forget Uriah.

- When David receives word from Bathsheba that she is pregnant, both she and David know that David is the father.⁶ David springs into a cover up.
- He calls Uriah back from the battlefield, asks him how the battle is going, hints that he should go home and enjoy an evening with his wife, and he follows that instruction up with a gift of wine and fruit and delectables to make the evening especially enticing.
- But instead of going home, Uriah sleeps “at the entrance to the King’s house, with the servants [and soldiers] of the King.”

Cover up attempt #1 on David’s part has failed.

- When David learns that Uriah has not gone down to his house, David calls Uriah in:

You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?

- Uriah responds:

The Ark [where God resides] and Israel and Judah [God’s people] remain in booths; and my [commander] Joab and [his soldiers] are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.

Cover up attempt #2 has failed.

⁴ II Samuel 11:3.

⁵ II Samuel 11:5.

⁶ The bath she was taking is one of purification after her menstrual cycle, as indicated in 11:4.

- The next day, David invites Uriah to eat and drink in his presence and David gets Uriah drunk.
- But at the end of a day of eating and drinking, Uriah still goes outside and lies on his couch with the soldiers and servants. He does not go down to his house.

Cover up #3 has failed.

- In his desperation, David writes Joab, the field commander:
 - “Set Uriah in the *forefront* of the hardest fighting, and then *draw back* from him, so that he may be *struck down* and *die*.”
 - As a military strategist, Joab knows this will not work. It will implicate both David and him in Uriah’s murder. But always putting David’s power and interests above all moral considerations, Joab devises a plan that might provide David what we would call “plausible deniability.”
 - Joab assigns Uriah a place where he knows there will be valiant warriors. Joab orders them to attack the city. The soldiers from the city come out and fight with Joab’s troops. Some of David’s soldiers are killed. Uriah is among the dead.

Cover up #4 succeeds.

But success is momentary, as you are entitled to know the rest of the story.

- David and Bathsheba marry.⁷
- Bathsheba gives birth to a son.⁸
- God then sends Nathan the prophet to confront David over what he has done.⁹ “Thou art the man,” Nathan says.
- David confesses and repents: “I have sinned,” he says. “I have sinned.”¹⁰
- Nathan pronounces that since David has *confessed* and *repented*, the Kingship will not be taken from him, but his child shall die¹¹ and his *family* will be marked by *strife* and *violence* and his *kingdom* will be marked by *strife* and *violence*.¹²
- The child to which Bathsheba gives birth lives only a few days.¹³
- David heroically and poignantly mourns the child’s illness and death.¹⁴
- A second child is born. His name is Solomon – “Beloved of the Lord.”¹⁵
- For the rest of David’s life, as Nathan had prophesied, David’s *family* and *kingdom* are torn by violence.¹⁶

⁷ II Samuel 11:27.

⁸ II Samuel 11:27.

⁹ II Samuel 12:1-12.

¹⁰ II Samuel 12:13.

¹¹ II Samuel 12:14.

¹² II Samuel 12 :7-12. Note verse 10.

¹³ II Samuel 12:15-19.

¹⁴ II Samuel 12:20-23.

¹⁵ II Samuel 12:24-25.

¹⁶ It begins immediately in II Samuel 13 with the Rape of Tamar by her half-brother, Amnon, both of whom are children of David; and David’s Kingdom and comes to its acme with the rebellion of one of David’s son Absalom, and Absalom’s death and David’s mourning, this time for an adult child (II Samuel 18:1-19:8). Even from his deathbed, David instructs Solomon whom among his enemies and threats to the throne he should eliminate (I Kings 2:1-9).

- At the end of David's life, two people are with him at his deathbed: Nathan the Prophet, and Bathsheba, who make sure that David anoints Solomon as King, as he had promised to do.¹⁷
- Then during Solomon's reign, the divisions that had erupted during David's rule become a complete Civil War as the nation splits into the Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom. After more than two hundred years, each Kingdom falls, and the people are carried into Exile.¹⁸ It is during Exile that they begin to envision and long for a Messiah, who is a different kind of royal ruler.¹⁹

The price of what David did is heavy: personally, familial, nationally. His are not deeds that go unpunished.

III.

So what about Uriah's character?

On one level, Uriah is *utterly loyal*:

- To his fellow soldiers
- To his immediate commanding officer Joab
- To his Commander in Chief David
- To his nation.

Uriah is likely young, recently married, to a beautiful woman, before the birth of any children, and yet he chooses to remain in solidarity with his fellow soldiers and servants of the King and nation rather than to experience an evening of intimate reunion with what Proverbs calls "the wife of [his] youth."²⁰

**

On a second level, at least in this instance, Uriah puts his *commitment to his calling and his country* over his commitment to his family. Uriah thus is like thousands of people who enter professions where the needs of those for whom they are *professionally responsible* – patients, students, parishioners, constituents, clients – rise above the *desire or need* within his marriage and family at that particular time.

While we have learned in our time that attending to family, to personal, spiritual and emotional health, to work/life balance are important values, they must sometimes be held in abeyance. Uriah reminds us that loyalty to a calling sometimes overrides presence with a family.

**

On a third level, over the centuries scholars have said that it is entirely possible that Uriah has figured out on his own or been tipped off by one of the members of the court concerning what David *has done* and is *trying to do*.

- "I will not go and lie with my wife," Uriah says, cutting through David's deceptive euphemism.

¹⁷ I Kings 1.

¹⁸ I Kings 3-II Kings 25.

¹⁹ See Isaiah 40; Daniel 7; Isaiah's servant songs.

²⁰ Proverbs 5:18.

- “I will not do such a *thing*,” followed by the narrator’s “The *thing* David did displeased the Lord.”²¹
- When David writes the letter to Joab and has Uriah hand-deliver it on the battlefield, if Uriah has any suspicions, he can easily unroll the scroll to confirm them.²²

It is entirely possible that Uriah wises up to what David is trying to do and even knows the letter he carries contains his own death sentence. If this is the case, Uriah chooses to face death with courage, dignity, and grace, walking into battle knowing that he will likely lose his life at the machinations of his own debased King. The way Uriah faces death has the dignity and courage with which Christ faced his own death.

IV.

Where does Uriah get this kind of character?

It comes partially from his *faith*:

- Uriah believes in the God of Israel and Judah, who resides in the Ark of the Covenant he is sworn to protect.
- Uriah believes in Israel and Judah, God’s people, even though he is a foreigner – a Gentile, a Hittite – who has migrated to Israel and adopted their faith.

But Uriah’s character comes also from the *family into which he marries*. Uriah’s father-in-law Eliam is a high-ranking military officer who also serves as one of David’s top advisors. Like physicians whose family members contain physicians, military people whose family are military, first responders whose family are first responders, teachers whose family are teachers, ministers whose family are ministers, Uriah’s character comes as he steps into destiny and genealogy of the family line into which he has married.

And I believe Uriah gets some of his character from *Bathsheba* herself.

- We only see Bathsheba when David *violates* her and when she is at David’s *deathbed*.
- In between, Bathsheba *marries* David, *gives birth* to a child who *dies* in infancy and to a second who *lives* into adulthood.
- Both she and her marriage *survive* the *tremendous tragedy* of the death of a child.
- She *survives* the violence and armed rebellion that break out in her husband’s family as a direct result of *his* actions.
- She *survives* the years of David’s declining success and the years of his declining health.

Yet when David is on his deathbed, the *two people* who are *with him* are *Bathsheba*, whom he violated, and *Nathan*, who confronted him over such violation. In those final hours, Bathsheba makes the case for David to *do the right thing*: name their son Solomon as successor to the throne.²³ And David does.

It takes strong character to be married to someone *of* strong character. In whatever short amount of time Uriah was married to Bathsheba, he develops some of his character from their relationship and marriage.

²¹ II Samuel 12:1.

²² Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 482 and 483.

²³ I Kings 1:11-53.

V.

When we study Uriah, a few *unanswered questions* remain.

- Is it possible that his choice of *solidarity* with his comrades over *intimacy* with his spouse reflects a deeper hesitance on Uriah's part about marriage or intimacy?
- Would it have been possible for Uriah to *report* David, or in some way try to blow the whistle on the King for the sake of the nation or for his own sake?
- Is it possible that Uriah doesn't know what is going on and is simply an *innocent* and *naïve* person, unaware of the evil around him?

All of these are possible.

But as Herman Melville says his character Billy Budd, who in many ways resembles Uriah:

*Truth uncompromisingly told
Will always have its ragged edges.*²⁴

There may be a few ragged edges in Uriah's story, but the *uncompromising truth* of his story is the *character* he opens to us as we invite him to step forth from the pages of scripture as we strive for the most honorable character we can have.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

²⁴ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Chapter 28. The novel was written in 1891 but not published until 1924.