

“Shattered Souls and Shards of Light”

Rev. Laurie Kraus

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'

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.'

It's difficult isn't it to hear a reading like this and say the Word of the Lord? Thanks be to God. It's doesn't seem like a Word of the Lord. In fact, it seems a little more like a word from the Me Too movement or maybe a word from the Church Too movement. A word from the Bible, an unusual word, breaking the silence around the Holy lives and the heroism of the greatest of our forebearers in the Hebrew scriptures, King David, the golden boy whom God loved and chose. There's so much unpleasantness and ugliness in our day-to-day lives and on the news today. You would think that the Revised Common Lectionary would give us a break and not made us read such awful stories here in church. We read the Bible, I think, to be inspired not

disgusted. We come to church for better and not for worse. And if any of our own personal histories or even the history of our forebearers, our country, or our city, bare similar ugly tales, well, mostly we just leave those tales in silence. Don't bring them to church.

When I was in seminary at Princeton many years ago I had a professor of pastoral counseling who made this fact abundantly clear when she was teaching us how to sit with people who had problems. Before she brought into class some real people who were trying to work out their issues with her - I can't believe she brought them to a first-year crowd of seminarians but that's another thing - she would talk to the class, and she would introduce their issues to us: adultery, alcoholism, financial malfeasance, abuse. As she told us about their issues, she would have a grimace of sort of dislike and disgust on her face. And then she would shake her head and conclude - she was from the South - this situation is as ugly as homemade sin from which I learned less about how to compassionately be with people who were suffering and had ugliness in their lives and a lot more about a sense, somehow, that some people's issues were just too nasty to talk about, too ugly to be redeemed by God and God's love within the church.

But this morning, for just a few minutes, the Bible wants us to know that even homemade sin is not too ugly to talk about in church. It is not too awful to be unveiled. It is not so far beyond redemption that we cannot tell those stories straight up and then listen for a word from God. The scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says about this story that it reveals more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves. So this is a story about David and maybe about any one of us in this room or someone we know and love. A story about what happens when someone experiences a failure of vocation or integrity or loss of meaning or a breakdown of identity that once indulged changes the landscape of their life forever. Indeed, the last time I was here in this church such a story was happening to your former night custodian. And we prayed and continue to pray that somehow redemption will come into a story as ugly, tragic, and horrible, as that one.

In the Bible, this story is not just a story about an individual, it's also a story about a nation, Ancient Israel, who put a lot of their origin myths, a lot of their historic and mythical meaning into the life of this man David, the Golden King of Israel. The one who was once and is to come again. This is a story of a people who were blessed to be a blessing, and a nation to shine as light and justice and loving kindness to a world that was saturated by violence. And that dream of who Israel was, and the reality of who David is, were deeply challenged by this story and the people who heard it. And then for some strange reason decided not to bury it in secrecy but rather to elevate it to sacred scripture. Because of that choice that they made to tell an ugly story about the once wonderful King of Israel, we know that this is also a story about God and the power that God gives God's people to face shattering truths about ourselves, shattering truths about our own origin myths here in this country and as human beings, and somehow having faced those truths to find a way forward.

In the spring of the year the story begins when kings go to battle, David stayed home. His place was actually with his soldiers in the field, but instead of doing what he knew he should do, he stayed home. And because he stayed home he became idle and lust overtook him. And the way this story unfolds is bald and brief and hard. It happened. He saw a woman. He sent. He lay with her. She conceived. What are we, who are listeners, supposed to believe and know about this story? How are we to feel about David? Where are the explanations we're used to, the mitigating circumstances? Where is the personal charm that will help us to say well, he made a mistake but he's a good man. In this story, nothing is spared and no excuses are made.

David's first inclination in this story, like ours I think, is to deny, to cover up, to run away. We aren't that kind of person. He would never do something like that. Maybe they'll never find out. Maybe if I start over, get a lawyer, go somewhere else, this will all just be like a mere memory of something that almost but didn't happen. And so we listen to the rest of this long and hard story as David tries to get Uriah to go home, to

cover up his mistake by sleeping with his wife, as David decides the only choice is to kill Uriah. And he does it. Uriah returns. The soldier dies, and David lies about it. And that too often, especially when we're in circumstances where power is not met with justice, that too often is the end of the matter. Or is it? The story says David said that the thing he did was not evil in his own eyes. But the next chapter begins the thing was evil in the sight of the Lord. The thing that was good enough for broken David, good enough for his generals and good enough for the nation, was not good enough for David's god.

And so God's people found the courage to tell this story and then to make sacred text of it. This would say to us that there is no power so absolute in the world. There's no truth so painful or dark that hides within any one of us that God's justice cannot find it, that God's love cannot redeem it. We live these days in a hard and ugly cultural time. And the church more and more, I think, is being called upon to speak a word of justice, to speak a word of love, to hope for and demonstrate for a compassion that will change it. And so the church steps out to say people's lives matter, black lives matter, women's lives matter. The lives of children separated from their families at the border matter, and we as a nation can do better and we will. If our ancestors in faith can tell such stories, then we the church can find the courage to tell such stories ourselves and to challenge the places of power that would rather keep those stories hidden.

Last summer I had the privilege of spending two weeks in Rwanda and hearing there about the church as it lived through genocide in 1994. No doubt you would have to look it up like I did to remember that that country is 90% Christian, and in 100 days over a million people were killed in inter-ethnic warfare. While the general outline of the genocide and its aftermath are well-documented, for me to see with my own eyes the places where people died, the hundreds of churches where people went for refuge and died, to see that with my own eyes was shattering and challenged my sense of what the church can and should be in hard circumstances. So it filled me with wonder when for the rest of that week, we were able to sit with leaders of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, a church whose leaders participated in genocide, the head of whose church actually informed on his own pastors so that they were killed, and how this church, after the genocide, came together and said, "What can we do?" No other church in this country is admitting what they've done, and yet, throughout the country, people were killed in the churches. As the government of Rwanda tried to rebuild the nation with its truth and reconciliation groups, the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda did a very brave thing. It confessed.

Until last year when the Pope finally confessed the complicity of the Catholic Church, the only church to speak up and to blame itself for the Rwandan genocide was the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda who said, "We have sinned, and we will make it right." And they did. That church changed the entire course of its social witness and of its teaching. It began to teach a different kind of theology so that genocide ideology, as they call it, would have no place in the Bible teaching of their people. They went to all the widows, and all of the children, and all of those who had lost homes and family members, and they said if you cannot make a living, then we will pay so that you will have a place to live, and food to eat, and train you to begin a new career. And they did it and they're still doing it. In one church in a town called Remera which had many, many dead, they sent a new, young pastor back there to rebuild the church which, as you might imagine, no one trusted after genocide. And after listening to the people there he began a group. He called the group Light. And in the group were survivors of genocide who did not want any longer to live with the bitterness of what they had experienced and perpetrators of genocide who, after having served their time, were allowed to go back into society but feared that no one would receive them.

One woman, Anastasia, told us the story of how she lost most of her family and then introduced a man she called her neighbor. This man, Celestin, stood up and began his remarks by saying, "I am Celestin. I killed many people. I have confessed my sins. I have gone to the prison. I have done all of this openly and everyone knows. I pray every day that God will forgive me and that I will someone be able to forgive myself." And then he told how he had come back to society, met with the victims and survivors of genocide in this town, some of whom family members he had participated in killing, and how they had together

learned to tell the truth to each other, learned to break bread together at the Lord's Table, learned to receive one another in their homes, and learned to weep and begin again. It is a long journey, he concluded, to forgive myself, but because God forgives us forgiveness passes into the community, and the community forgave us. I pray to God to forgive me, and I pray to God that all wars everywhere will cease.

David's story in the Bible this morning, Celestin's story, and stories of many, many, many people in this room and in the world tell us something important about the nature of God. That God can work for good, not just in spite of the terrible things that we do to one another but, perhaps especially, in the midst of that brokenness. The songwriter and the poet, Leonard Cohen, has a song that has this line. The song is called Anthem, and from it comes the rather odd title of my sermon. Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, it's how the light gets in. May God give us the courage to face the cracks, to look deeply into the darkness, to tell the truth, and to let the light in so that through us light can shine in the world. Amen.