

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Fall of a Hero”

August 2, 2009

Reverend Art Ritter

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

26 When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD,

12¹and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, ‘There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.’ ⁵Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’

7 Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ¹¹Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹²For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.’ ¹³David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan said to David, ‘Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die.

Everyone has heard of him. He was good looking and ruddy faced, with beautiful soft eyes and wavy hair. He was a man of whom we would be envious. He was

courageous, even as a young boy. He went out to fight the giant Goliath when those twice his age shook with fear. He was a great king, uniting the various tribes of Israel into one powerful kingdom and leading his troops into battle after battle. He was a visionary. Under his leadership the city of Jerusalem was built. He was a man of the arts and letters. He drew and perhaps even painted. He was a composer of music. He was an excellent musician. He was a writer of Psalms. He was God's anointed one. He was David.

Perhaps no one in the history of ancient Israel stood out more than David. He was all things that God promised and all things that God wanted. Consider this description of David from the historian/theologian who wrote the book of I Kings. He wrote, "David did what was right in the sight of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that the Lord commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite."

Wait a minute! What was that again? David did what was right *except* in the matter of Uriah the Hittite? Therein lies the blemish of an otherwise perfect life. This story is the little matter of King David and Uriah the Hittite.

Even a young Sunday School student has heard of David. But who is this man Uriah the Hittite? Uriah was one of the mightiest men in David's army. He was a member of "The Order of the Thirty," the very best fighters in the kingdom. Like many in the order, Uriah was not officially a Jew. He was a foreigner who had come to know and worship the God of Israel. He was loyal to King David. He was loyal to God's law. But he was an outsider and much less was expected of him than a good, God-fearing Israelite. If he were to break a few laws or to compromise the faith a little bit, well- after all he was a Hittite. You could expect that from those foreigners!

The time came for King David to send his army out to war. It was expected when the troops engaged the enemy, that their king would lead them into battle. It was the kingly thing to do. It was probably even the place where God expected David to be. But for some reason, David decided to stay behind in Jerusalem. Perhaps he was growing afraid of battle. Maybe he was becoming quite comfortable in his palace and figured that his legion of unimportant foreigners could better afford to die. Quite possibly he had some important business luncheons. Or maybe he simply wanted to play a round or two of golf at the Jerusalem Country Club.

David was forty-eight years old. He was at midlife, in the middle of a midlife crisis. David was feeling too old to be heroic. He was too cozy living the palatial life to risk losing it all by keeping promises to God, fulfilling his duty to his people, and being who and what he was supposed to be. Why hazard being faithful to God's call when it is so much easier and feels so good being something less? Why risk the slings and arrows of doing battle for God when you can still be king and stay in the security of your own palace? There was no sense in being foolish, suffering the pains of faithfulness when you are already God's anointed one.

And so King David stayed behind, fitting in with the culture around him, having two martinis at lunch, taking long naps in the afternoon, and doing whatever he pleased in the evening. Uriah the Hittite and the rest of the troops honored their commitment and went off to battle.

One afternoon, as he was walking on the roof of his palace, David noticed a very attractive woman bathing. He took one long look at her and he knew that he had to

possess her. The woman was Bathsheba. It just so happened that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. The king sent his messengers to bring Bathsheba to him. There was no indecisiveness in this decision. David knew what he wanted and he knew what had to be done to get it. He was the King! Days later Bathsheba sent a message back to David. And it was the worst possible news. "I am pregnant," she said.

To save David's reputation and to keep him looking good in front of his subjects, something had to be done quickly. This part of the story might sound really familiar to we modern folk. Immediately the king's mind went into high gear. Surely he would not have to suffer the consequences of his behavior. David had to find a way to excuse his sin or even legitimize it. He was God's anointed one. Wasn't he supposed to get whatever he wanted? There had to be a way out of this. There had to be a political strategy. There must be no more talk of Bathshebagate in the Jerusalem press. And so the cover-up was born.

King David sent for Uriah the Hittite. The loyal soldier came back from the front lines and was wined and dined at the palace. Good King David, pretending genuine interest, acted as if Uriah had returned only to offer the king a first-hand report of how the war was progressing. But selfish King David had other ideas. If he could get husband and wife together again, perhaps Uriah would think that the child Bathsheba was carrying was his own. And so David told Uriah, "Since you are in town, why don't you stop by the house, pack a suitcase, pick up the little woman and spend a romantic weekend together. I've arranged a room for you at the King David hotel in Jerusalem. There's a hot tub, a heart shaped bed, candlelight dinner, room service breakfast, and a well stocked bar. Go ahead and take a well-deserved break from your soldiering. You and your wife should go enjoy yourself!"

But Uriah the Hittite, the outsider to God, would have none of this. He understood that his righteous place was back fighting the battle. Like his fellow soldiers, and according to the law of the religious covenant, he had sworn himself to celibacy until the war was over.

It was then that David forgot persuasion and tried ordering Uriah back to Bathsheba. Uriah still refused. And so the cover-up went even further. David invited Uriah to dinner. While there David hoped that the Hittite would get so drunk that he would lose his wits and his conscience and that he would return home to sleep with his wife Bathsheba. Still Uriah refused. Despite the effect of the good, sweet wine, when he returned home Uriah didn't go into the bedroom to sleep. He didn't even enter his house. He slept alone on the hard stones of the porch.

Uriah the Hittite had made a promise. He lived in a day in which promises made were often ignored or treated with disdain. But Uriah the Hittite remembered the things he had said when he accepted a covenant with God. He remembered the risk required of him to be faithful to God's will. He remembered how God's intention might place him in uncomfortable places. He remembered not to enter decisions of faith lightly, and not to forget them when something more appealing to the sense of pleasure comes along. Uriah the Hittite intended to remain pure in his devotion to his duty, to his king, and to his God.

It was really quite ironic. Uriah the Hittite, the outsider, proved to be more faithful and righteous than the ultimate insider, God's anointed one, King David. You see, Uriah the Hittite was a man of integrity.

King David was exasperated by this integrity. When his schemes failed to develop properly, he took the cover-up one step further. He resorted to violence. He sent Uriah the Hittite back to the front lines with an official order. The order was indeed a death sentence. It read, "Send Uriah the Hittite to the most dangerous spot on the battlefield. When he gets there, withdraw all of the other troops so that he can be struck down and killed." Finally the plan worked. Uriah the Hittite was killed.

Like many others in the centuries to follow, Uriah the Hittite found that following God's will does not always lead to an earthly reward or to a promotion. Virtue and servanthood often seem get laughed at, trampled, scorned by the forces of power that run rampant in the world. Uriah the Hittite was a victim. Perhaps we are not being faithful if we are not occasionally victims ourselves. In this story, the man the world envied was still alive, eating a feast and sleeping comfortably in a Jerusalem palace. The man who was ultimately righteous lay dead in a forgotten battlefield.

When Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, heard that her husband was dead, she at first did the appropriate thing. She lamented for him. When her mourning was over, David sent for her and brought her to his house. She became his wife and she born David a son.

A story of two men. One was a king who apparently stood out among men because of his looks, his intelligence, his talent, his bravery, and his God-given authority. The other man was a mere soldier, an outsider, and a nobody. One man ignored where and what he should have been, staying distant from his true place in God's intention. The other man was loyal, going where he was called even at great risk, even in the face of ultimate rejection. One man made promises and when they did not suit his interests or his urges, he easily broke them. The other man regarded a promise, especially a promise to God as something sacred, never to be broken. One man searched for how he could do what he wanted to do. The other man searched for way to do what was right.

King David, in anointed one of God, the champion of ancient Israel. Uriah the Hittite, the outsider, the foot soldier and pawn in the schemes of the world. One man was a man of compromise and cover-up. The other man was one of integrity and righteousness. One man was a hero who fell to selfish sin. The other man was a common person who remained faithful to God.

I wonder. I wonder why this story was passed down for generations. I wonder why it eventually found its way into Scripture. I wonder why we all need to hear it again today.